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COLLECTION

OF

BRITISH AUTHORS

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2364.

A SECOND LIFE BY MRS. ALEXANDER

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. 3.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

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VOL. III.

BAYERISCHE
STAATS-
BIBLIOTHEK
MUENCHEN

A SECOND LIFE.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1885.

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A SECOND LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

Leigh was more deeply moved by this interview than he anticipated, although he had looked forward to it eagerly.

The firmness and resignation of so young, so delicate a woman, were infinitely touching; and as he walked slowly back to his chambers he thought only of Mildred's strange position—of her appalling isolation—of what was best for her to do.

"She can never live on as she is doing," he thought; "it is too dreadful a destiny for such a creature, and full of all imaginable danger. If only she could rejoin her brother! Where has he been all this time? True, Trevor mentioned in his last letter that he met him in Calcutta; but he has not been there always."

Then he thought of his first interview with Mildred, only three years and a half ago. How well he remembered the fair graceful girl, the cherished home-darling, and the discussions respecting "Trevor's beauty," to which he had listened with a conviction that the speakers were incapable of recognising the promise rather than the actuality of fascination which he per-

ceived. He was amused, too, by her disregard of himself, and her evident regret to exchange so brilliant a partner as Trevor for a mere black-coated civilian.

Altogether, the girlish *débutante* of St. Hubert's ball had impressed herself on his imagination, more especially because of the tragical termination of her first festivity.

He had gone abroad soon after, but had heard from Trevor of her marriage. And with a kindly hope that she was thus saved from the grip of poverty and hardship, he dismissed the subject from his mind; nor did it recur to him till his attention was attracted to the account of her death in the *Times*. When, therefore, he had turned to meet Mrs. Griffith's messenger that early spring morning in the Eccleston Square drawing-room, and found himself face to face with a pale cold likeness of Mildred Carr, he was indeed startled as though one had risen from the dead.

His first impression was that the girl he had seen at St. Hubert's stood before him. But he possessed natural and well-trained self-control, and preserved his composure, though while speaking with her he kept repeating to himself, "It is impossible!—it is but a trick of imagination." Then a slight smile thrilled him with recognition, amazement—almost awe! He was glad when she left the room, that he might think freely. He must be mistaken! yet he rarely forgot a face—and Mildred Carr's was still fresh in his memory. How came she there, in Mrs. Griffith's stately establishment? He was a blockhead—a drivelling idiot—to be so cheated by fancy! She was gone—the bright girl he had seen dancing at her first ball—buried in the unfathomed depths of a crevasse; and this gentle,

sad-looking woman, this ghost of the fair creature he remembered, had evidently not the faintest recollection of him!

That did not affect the question, however. He knew his girlish partner had hardly noticed him, that she had never heard his name. It was an extraordinary likeness—that was all; but he would watch, he would ascertain, if possible, the history of his kinswoman's secretary.

With increasing familiarity the conviction grew upon him that Mrs. Wood and the lady who had perished so tragically on the Mer de Glace were one and the same. The occupation of watching every minute indication of identity, of finding rare opportunities of speaking with this strange dead-alive woman, was absorbing; and from the first, Leigh resolved to impart his discovery to none. He would keep her secret inviolably—he would not hint it to herself. But as his interest and admiration grew, an intense longing sometimes seized him to say—"I know you, and I alone!"

Then the question of her escape gave him many an hour's thought. He pieced together the possible means, as though working out a problem, and with his keen logical intellect he arrived at conclusions not very different from the facts.

Why she had left her husband, was yet an unsolved riddle. Leigh had had no opportunity of knowing what Mildred's married life had been; his first idea, therefore, was that she had escaped with extraordinary ingenuity to join a lover, who had tired of her, or she of him, or for other reasons had parted from him, and found employment of some description necessary.

There was a refinement, a delicacy in her manner, her whole bearing, that forbade this conclusion, but Leigh had had some curious experiences in his life, and believed that most things were possible. The fear she betrayed, to his watchful eye, when Colonel Griffith affected to recognise her, and the indications of an understanding with Frank, until they were explained, irritated him to a degree which warned him of his own danger, and induced him to leave Pennogwen, only to find himself again curiously linked with the fortunes of "Trevor's beauty."

Though only a friendly acquaintance, and not a correspondent, Leigh had written to Trevor, making some excuse for reverting to the subject, and asking for some information respecting the state of affairs in the Welby family previous to Mrs. Welby's death. He had received a reply very shortly before this fresh complication, giving a painful picture of the poor young wife's unhappiness, and stating the writer's conviction that she had sought to end a miserable life by the tragedy he had witnessed.

Trevor added that he had had a melancholy pleasure in meeting poor Mildred Carr's brother, and finding him in a good position, owing to the kind offices of that excellent fellow Gribble, who was a connection of the Welby family.

Reflecting on this and many other topics more or less linked with it, Leigh regained his rooms, and sat down to write to Frank Griffith, entreating him to report Lady Mary's movements.

"We once had a great quarrel," he concluded, "and I don't want to return to Pennogwen until she is safe off the premises."

If his interview with Mildred had thrilled Leigh with extraordinary interest, it was doubly important in her eyes. In her it created a mixture of fear and pleasure. Her secret was no longer her own, it was shared by a stranger—a man certainly in whose loyalty she was disposed to put full faith, still who was thus in a measure master of her destiny. Against this was balanced the joy of being her own proper self once more, of speaking face to face with one who had known her in her former state of existence, who had seen her mother, who had associated with her brother.

What a welcome, unexpected link with the past! and safe? Oh! yes, he would never betray her. He had known her from the first, and for all these months he had never by word or look harassed her with a hint that she was recognised! Then from what cruel detection he had just saved her! No, there was more pleasure than pain in the crisis through which she had just passed—but—she would like to tell all to Koo, and hear what she thought.

Mildred, still quivering from the excitement of this interview, had not moved from the spot where she stood when Leigh left her. Thought crowded on thought swiftly, vividly through her brain, when Mrs. Leavett, having heard of the wonderful event that a gentleman had asked for Mrs. Wood, and gone upstairs to see her, ascended in no small alarm to learn the result of this startling occurrence.

"Oh! dear Koo, I have so much to tell you! The sender of the telegram has revealed himself! Can you stay and hear all?"

"Yes, that I can! if every soul below was bawling 'shop'!"

As Mildred told her story, condensing as much as possible, Mrs. Leavett's face grew very grave.

"What do you think?" concluded Mildred uneasily, and taking her old friend's hand in both hers.

"My dear, I don't like it at all! It frightens me to think that you are at the mercy, in a manner of speaking, of a man—and a stranger!"

"But, auntie, he is a very kind, good man!"

"How can you know that? What do you know about him?"

"I do think he is an honourable gentleman," returned Mildred. "He has always seemed different from the rest, and I am sure he would not betray me."

"Well, I suppose no gentleman would! but few men are to be trusted with power. He may be all right, or——I should like to see him," breaking off suddenly.

"So you shall: and I think you will say he looks honest. He will call here to-morrow."

"Why? what's bringing him back?" cried Mrs. Leavett suspiciously.

"To let me know if Lady Mary has actually written, or is going to Pennogwen. Of course I must not return until she is safe out of the way."

"Return! Oh! my dear young lady, don't you go back to that dreadful place, full of traps and pitfalls! Stay you here with me!"

"I will think about it, dear, kind old friend! and do not make yourself uneasy about Mr. Leigh. I was greatly frightened myself at first; but now I think he may be a good—a useful friend."

The more Mrs. Leavett set forth the dangers of this discovery, the more, by a natural spirit of contra-

diction, Mildred was disposed to believe Leigh trustworthy and generous.

"Well, there is no use in talking," said Mrs. Leavett gloomily; "what's done cannot be undone. Only, don't you have more to do with this gentleman than you can help. It's a curious turn—a very curious turn," concluded the good woman, with an ominous shake of the head.

"Now I must write to Mrs. Griffith, and say something about the telegram. What can I say?"

"I am a poor hand to help," returned Mrs. Leavett.

Mildred rose, and set forth her writing materials.

"I should not like to break with Mrs. Griffith," she said; "I am really of use to her, and I like her. Then, Kooie dear, it is delightful to earn money, instead of spending my little capital. I am safer with Mrs. Griffith than I could be almost anywhere else."

"Maybe so; but I wish to God your own brother were here to take care of you! There! I mustn't spend my time talking any more!"

After much thought, Mildred simply informed Mrs. Griffith that it was necessary for her to see a gentleman who had some important information to give her, and who would be but a short time in town.

"There is a little truth in that," she thought, as she paused; and then added that she might be detained a week, or even more.

"How weak," she mused, as she closed her letter. "How weak I am to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel! I strive to keep downright falsehood out of my letter, and yet my whole life is a deception. Shall I ever dare to be myself? It is pleasant to think that Mr. Leigh, at least, knows who I really am. What

harm can possibly arise from his sharing my secret? Poor Koo is too frightened about me."

* * * * *

It was with tremulous excitement that Mildred awaited Leigh's coming. She longed yet dreaded to tell him her story. She saw that he considered her conduct in leaving her husband inexplicable, and she wanted to exculpate herself in his eyes so far as she could.

She had a strong wish to make a friend of him; his invariable grave respectful politeness won her confidence. Perhaps he would be a friend—a stay to her.

She instinctively endeavoured to make the sitting-room look pretty, despatching Dick to get some flowers; but of her own appearance she did not think, or only how she could best make it severely simple, rigidly unornamental.

It was not till the afternoon that Leigh made his appearance.

"I had hoped for a letter from Frank Griffith," he said after they had exchanged greetings, as he drew a chair facing the sofa into a corner of which Mildred had niched herself, thinking how strange it seemed that Brian Leigh, the great Mrs. Griffith's favourite kinsman, should be visiting her as a friend and equal. "So I waited for the midday post. I am sorry I have nothing to report from Pennogwen; but I thought you would expect me in any case."

"Oh yes, I have been expecting you. Mr. Griffith *will* write, will he not? I am so anxious to know about Lady Mary."

"He will write without fail. Of course he cannot imagine how anxiously we are waiting for his letter."

There was a short pause—Leigh, thinking how he could best bring her to speak of her wonderful escape, while her thoughts were far away.

"I wonder how it was I forgot you so completely," said Mildred at length, looking at him with the utter absence of self-consciousness which was peculiar to her. "Even now I do not recall your face, but your voice always had a certain familiarity."

"I quite understand it," returned Leigh, with a smile. "My pleasant friend Trevor overshadowed me, and you never heard my name."

"Was Captain Trevor a friend of yours?"

"Yes; he is a relation of Colonel Griffith, and Frank on the Egerton side. It was with him I met your brother."

"How much I liked Captain Trevor! He was so good to me."

"He is a good fellow. I had a letter from him about three weeks ago. He has met your brother frequently; and Trevor says he seems getting on capitally. He is with a Mr. Gribble."

"Yes, I know him well. He was a true friend; but for him I should not be here now."

"Then does he know of"—a slight hesitation—"of your escape?"

"Oh no; I dare not tell him. He would be angry with me. I wanted him to help me in obtaining separation, but he would not hear of it." She paused and resumed with heightened colour, and looking down at a tassel of the sofa cushion, which she drew through her hand over and over again, her voice growing unsteady as she spoke. "I often think with pain and humiliation that I should seem a faithless

unprincipled woman if people knew I had deserted my husband in so extraordinary a manner. And I know I have done wrong. But it was a terrible life! no one knows *how* terrible and degrading. And Mr. Welby was hopeless. Every day was an ignoble martyrdom! When I married I liked him. I should have grown to love him well, for I was grateful; but he killed my affection. He was so cruel to those I loved. Still, I would not harm him. It is not hatred I feel; only disgust."

She shuddered visibly; then growing suddenly pale and calm, she dropped the tassel, clasped her hands upon her knee, and raising her eyes steadily to his, said, "I know I have done wrong. I am ready in all humility to bear the consequences; but I do *not* repent. I would do the same deed again were it before me."

"The punishment is bitter," returned Leigh, looking into her eyes with grave sympathy. "It is social death. What a destiny for a creature like you! Tell me (you will pardon my asking, as you said you would so far confide in me) how you managed to avoid detection when you seemed to fall into the crevasse. I have heard the particulars second-hand from Frank Griffith, who was Trevor's great chum, and who, by-the-way, but for a sprained ankle, would have been with Trevor and your party on that memorable occasion."

"How strange!" cried Mildred, growing more at ease now that the subject of her apparent death had been opened up. "As to my escape, there was really only one dangerous moment when I rushed from the edge of the crevasse to hide among the stones of the moraine. After that, no one thought of looking for me."

"How did the idea occur to you?"

"I had been thinking night and day from the time Mr. Gribble left for India how I could escape from Mr. Welby. I was ready to dare anything save death to accomplish this. I had not the courage to kill myself. Nearly a week before we attempted the ascent to the 'Jardin,' we had luncheon at Montanvert, where the expedition was planned. Mr. Welby was reluctant to go; and in persuading him and talking over the difficulties, Jacques Durrand, the guide, described the crevasse and the snow bridge over it. Then I saw my chance."

She proceeded to explain the circumstances, as she had formerly detailed them to Mrs. Leavett, in a low quiet tone, her hands generally clasped upon her knee; sometimes when more deeply moved using slight impressive gesticulation.

Leigh listened with all his soul. It was almost impossible to realize that a spirit so daring, so enduring, could be imprisoned in a frame slight, delicate, supple, like the girlish creature now pouring out her strange tale with such utter trust in his sympathy and honour. Not a change of expression, not an inflection of voice or varying tinge of colour escaped him.

"It is the most extraordinary story I have ever heard," said Leigh, with a quick sigh when she ceased to speak. "I do not see how it is to end; even if not recognised (and that you have escaped recognition so long is marvellous), the life of suppression before you is not to be contemplated. It is impossible! Let me beg of you to think seriously of communicating with your brother. He ought to return, to protect you: to secure your separation from that—that—brute Welby!"

"Oh no, no!" cried Mildred, shrinking with repugnance. "Do you not understand? Arthur is poor: he depends on Mr. Gribble, and Mr. Gribble was strongly opposed to any separation; moreover, I have used the money he left me, in doing the very thing he would disapprove. No, I cannot *write* to him; but were he to come to England I would gladly—oh, how gladly!—speak to him."

"I must not press my counsels on you, until I have proved myself worthy of being a counsellor," returned Leigh, seeing she was somewhat exhausted, and not able to bear the prospect of further trials just then. "Do you still think of returning to Pennogwen?"

"Yes! Why? Do you think I ought not to go on living there under false pretences?" cried Mildred.

"By no means! You honestly perform the duties you have undertaken; your own difficulties in no way affect your position with Mrs. Griffith, to whom you are a great comfort, while I believe you are as safe there as you can be anywhere."

"I am glad you think so; for my employment with Mrs. Griffith has been a boon to me in many ways. It draws me from myself, it enables me to be self-supporting; and had I not been with her I should not have met *you*," she added with a smile, so sad, so sweet, so entirely unconscious, that it sent a strange thrill of intense feeling, part pity, part fire, shivering through him; "for though I was terrified at first to find you knew me, it is very, very delightful to talk of the past—to be my own self for a little while," she concluded.

"And you believe, I trust, that your secret is as

safe with me as with yourself," replied Leigh, in low earnest tones.

"Ah, yes! I am sure you are true and loyal!"

After a short pause he resumed the conversation by an allusion to Frank Griffith's affairs; and then Mildred bethought her of Mrs. Leavett's desire to see the man of whose participation in the secret of her dear young lady's life she was so jealous. Having, therefore, exchanged a few sentences on the subject of the anonymous letters, Mildred said:

"I should like to introduce you to my good 'aunt,' whose sheltering kindness has made existence under my circumstances possible."

"Mrs. Leavett!" cried Leigh, "I should greatly like to see her."

Mildred accordingly rang, and asked if her aunt was disengaged, and if she would come to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Leavett, in preparation for this summons, had put on her best gown: and therefore had only to remove the large apron by which she protected it while in the shop, when Mildred's message reached her; and she speedily made her appearance—a type of solid respectability.

She dropped a slight curtsey as Leigh rose courteously to receive her; while Mildred said:

"I wished you, dear auntie, to see a gentleman who knew my brother—who has seen my mother"—her voice faltered a little—"and who remembers my unhappy self. This, Mr. Leigh, is my best and only friend!"

Leigh bowed.

"My young lady sorely needs friends—true friends,"

said Mrs. Leavett sternly, with a penetrating glance at the stranger.

"She does! and I am sure you will agree with me in thinking her best—her only plan, is to let her brother know she is still alive, and to claim his protection."

"There now! didn't I always tell you so, Mrs. Wood, my dear! and here's a gentleman as knows the world a deal better than a plain, hard-working woman like me, says the same."

"I long, yet dread, to follow your advice," said Mildred. "Why should I trouble anyone? I feel as if I had forfeited the right to ask for protection."

"That is being a little morbid, Mrs. Wood."

"Indeed, my dear young lady, that is just nonsense! Because you broke away from a cruel life, and the worst of bad treatment, isn't your own brother to look after you? Wouldn't he be ready to do it, too?"

"There can be no doubt of that, I imagine," added Leigh. "How deeply grateful he would be to know that his sister has found refuge with so faithful a friend as Mrs. Leavett!"

"Ah! I wish she would take your advice, sir."

"Do not urge me now. I must think—I must consider," returned Mildred.

She was white and tremulous. Her conversation with Leigh had excited her, and the reaction had set in.

"I will not trespass upon you any longer," he said, perceiving this. "You may rest assured I shall let you know directly I have any news from Pennogwen. Frank is most probably writing to me to-day. If I have his letter to-morrow I shall bring it to you in the after-

noon. So for the present good-morning," taking up his hat. "Good-morning, Mrs. Leavett!"

Mildred held out her hand, which he took, and bowed over with the most profound respect.

"Well, Koo!" said Mildred, sinking again into her corner of the sofa as the door closed on her new friend.

"Well, my dear!" repeated Mrs. Leavett, looking after the visitor. "I really believe he is a gentleman, and an honest man. He seemed quite in earnest about writing to your brother. That looked well—still——"

She stopped abruptly.

"Still what? O wise and prudent auntie!"

"Still, don't you let him come here too often. You see, my dear young lady, though you are equal to the best of them, you don't *seem* so now; and if a gentleman like that—(and he is a regular tip-top gentleman)—comes to a poor place like this—comes frequent, I mean—people will talk."

"I suppose it would seem incongruous," returned Mildred thoughtfully. "But it can only be for a few days; as soon as Lady Mary is safe across the Channel I shall return to Pennogwen."

"And this Mr. Leigh, is he going back too?"

"I am not sure—I think so."

"Then I hope he will be careful and not notice you too much."

"He never does notice me," said Mildred. Then, with a deep sigh, "I feel such a poor unsubstantial ghost, that it seems strange anyone should consider the ordinary rules of social life applicable to me. I don't seem to myself like other people."

* * * * *

The expected letter from Frank Griffith duly reached his cousin next morning, and in the afternoon Leigh drove up in a hansom, laden with books and flowers.

He noticed that Mildred looked brighter, as if she had rested well. It seemed quite natural to see Brian Leigh enter the room on this third visit; and he too felt as he were in his right when he ascended the stairs at Mrs. Leavett's humble dwelling.

"I have brought Frank's letter," he said, after greetings were exchanged, while Mildred, having received the flowers with warm thanks and sparkling eyes, busied herself putting them temporarily in water; "it may amuse you. Lady Mary appears to make herself at home. He says: 'My mother has not been quite so well. I believe she is simply upset by the loss of Mrs. Wood; and the result is trying to everyone. Lady Mary Dacre wrote, as you told me she intended doing, and having requested a telegram in reply, arrived the next day. "When Greek meets Greek," etc.! The discussions—to use the mildest terms—between her and Mrs. Egerton are very lively. She has allied herself with Gwen Ferrers, and between them they make it rather hot for the wandering widow. Godfrey is the object of much delicate attention from Lady M., who cannot quite renounce her "killing" ways. He is, however, quite impervious. Lady Mary talks of staying till the 20th, but is, I think, open to solicitations. I will keep you informed of her movements. I am acting as secretary *pro tem.*, and am going to write to Mrs. Wood myself, to entreat her to come back. I did not know how necessary she had become to my mother

till she was absent. We must keep her at any cost. And what a trump she has been to me!' There, Mrs. Wood!" said Leigh, folding up his letter. "Now is your time to make unlimited demands!"

Mildred smiled, and then grew quickly grave.

"It is cheering to think I am of use. But I fear Lady Mary is going to make a long stay."

"Are you anxious to return to Pennogwen?"

"I shall be pleased to be with Mrs. Griffith again, but my anxiety is about Lady Mary. I shall not feel safe while she is in England."

"You may depend on my keeping you informed of her movements. She must return, I believe, before the end of August; she is going to settle her family in Rome for the winter: at present they are somewhere in Switzerland. Once away, she is safe for six or eight months; so pray do not keep yourself imprisoned on that account. I shall know when she is in town again. I don't believe you have been out of the house since you came to town."

"No, I have not; but I do not mind keeping indoors."

"It is very bad for your nerves; you will grow depressed——" He stopped abruptly.

It was desperately tempting to propose an expedition to some of the delightful environs of London: very safe, too—for almost everyone was out of town. How charming it would be! But Leigh resisted stoutly; and before he could continue his speech, Mildred replied:

"You are right! I will ask Mrs. Leavett's boy to come out with me this evening; we can go into Battersea Park, where I am sure not to meet anyone who will recognise me."

"Pray do! You must miss the air and exercise you had at Pennogwen; and, Mrs. Wood, I have brought you some books, as I don't fancy you have many here —and to be without books is destitution indeed."

"You are very good! I find it such an infinite relief to forget myself in a book. Are there any of your own writing among these?"

"No; I have never written a book."

"Are you going to stay much longer in town?"

"Only till Lady Mary is clear off."

"What!" cried Mildred, struck by his reply, which he spoke without reflecting. "Are you indeed staying here, at this unseasonable season, for my sake?"

"I should willingly do so; but I have also some business to attend to," said Leigh, recollecting himself.

Then, with commendable prudence, he cut short his visit, leaving Mildred wonderfully cheered by the conviction that she had won a friend who was so admirably fitted to keep watch and ward against the outer world.

The ten days which ensued, while Lady Mary kept possession of Pennogwen, were brighter than any Mildred had ever hoped to spend again. Leigh came frequently with reports of the proceedings at his kinswoman's abode, but he was careful not to stay too long. Even in these short interviews they found much that was interesting to talk about; once or twice he forgot the time in an animated discussion about one of the books he had lent her — otherwise he was guarded, and self-ruling.

At length a morning came when he arrived earlier than usual; and as soon as Mildred came into the room, he exclaimed without any preface:

"She will arrive this evening—Lady Mary, I mean! I am to dine with her at Charing Cross, and shall see her safe away to-morrow morning. I shall let you know when she is actually off, in time to post a letter to Mrs. Griffith, and you can fix your own time to go down to Pennogwen."

"Thank you. Oh, thank you! You have saved me."

"Then you will be at home all day to-morrow, Mrs. Wood? For I am not sure when I can call."

"Yes! I shall not stir out."

Lady Mary was quite touched and flattered by the kind attentions of her old admirer, Brian Leigh.

At dinner he was peculiarly agreeable, and regretted that business of the most particular and private nature prevented his returning to Pennogwen while she was there. Next morning he was not only at the station to say good-bye, but at the last moment took a return ticket, accompanied her to Dover, and finally waved his last farewell from the end of the Admiralty Pier—having in the most friendly manner begged of her to keep him informed of her doings, and to allow him to send her a little London news from time to time.

At four o'clock he presented himself in Morton Street.

"Now, Mrs. Wood, you may write your letter. I have seen the enemy in full retreat across the Channel. What day shall you fix for your return?"

"A couple of days will make no great difference. I shall say Saturday."

"Very well. I go to-morrow morning; I want to get back to my work. If you write now, I can post your letter in time for the evening mail."

Leigh rose as he spoke, and paced slowly in silence

to and fro, coming to a stand by the table, and taking up a book at which he looked, while Mildred wrote a few lines to Mrs. Griffith.

"I have always forgotten to tell you how terribly frightened I was by Colonel Griffith's insinuation that he knew me or had seen me before," said Mildred, suddenly looking up from her letter. "You relieved my mind a good deal; still, at times thrills of dread steal through me."

"You need not fear; he has not the smallest clue to your identity. I only regret you ever permitted him to see your fear."

"But did he? I thought—at least I tried to present a brave steady front to the foe."

"You have shown wonderful pluck, Mrs. Wood; nevertheless, there is something electric in the way truth is recognised. You *were* afraid, and Colonel Griffith felt it; you must now coolly defy him."

Mildred shuddered slightly.

"I have a sort of unreasoning dread of him," she said. "I wish he would leave Pennogwen!"

"He has made an unusually long stay; it is high time for him to go."

Mildred did not reply; she was writing.

"I have such an objection to write my false name," she said presently; "still, I must. My only correspondent is Mrs. Leavett—for her 'Mildred' is enough; but to Mrs. Griffith I must put it in full."

"I almost wonder you did not change your Christian name also."

"I thought of doing so, but could not. That name is the one bit of my old—my first life left to me—the name I was called in my home. No, I could not

renounce it, nor need anyone know it; no one will want to call me by my Christian name."

There was a pause.

"I have had two letters from Miss Ferrers, and one from Mr. Griffith, all entreating and commanding my return," said Mildred, with a smile, as she closed her envelope; "I ought to be flattered."

"Yes! you have made yourself very essential to Mrs. Griffith; but she is whimsical—a trifle may turn her against you." He paused. "In any case, I suppose you are sure of a shelter here?"

"Yes, quite sure."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Wood! As we shall have few opportunities of speaking together at Pennogwen, let me beg you to think of writing to your brother; I see no other means of deliverance for you. And," taking her hand in his gently, "may I hope that you will not hesitate to make use of me as seems best in your eyes?"

CHAPTER II.

It was with an unusual stirring sense of expectation that Brian Leigh walked into the drawing-room at Pennogwen after dinner on the Saturday following the conversation last recorded. Should he find Mildred once more at her post?

In his thoughts he always called her Mildred—all other names had ceased to exist for her; but this, like her distinct individuality, would never change.

A curious sense of proprietorship and accompanying responsibility as regarded her had sprung up in his mind since she had accepted his knowledge of her identity with trust and evident relief.

Henceforth they two were separated from the rest of the world by an invisible fence of secret understanding, which none might overpass till the time came when, in accordance with his advice, she would communicate the fact of her existence to her brother. Already he anticipated this period with reluctant uneasiness. Yet he must urge her to it—it was her only hope.

On entering the room, however, he looked round in vain. The slim dark figure he sought was nowhere to be seen.

Leigh was too much on his guard to make either observation or inquiry, but took a seat beside Mrs. Egerton, and began to tell her some particulars of the day's sport, knowing that she would soon inform him

of any unusual event which had occurred during the last twenty-four hours.

Mr. Ferrers was reading aloud to Mrs. Griffith some interesting items from the local paper, and Gwendoline immensely busy over a new kind of needlework which she had taken up enthusiastically. Colonel Griffith and Frank had not yet left the dining-room.

"You seem to have made a wonderful bag," said Mrs. Egerton. "However, *our* day has not been uneventful, I assure you. The incomparable secretary, the mysterious amanuensis has returned, and has been most warmly welcomed by Mrs. Griffith. It is amazing —indeed, more than amazing, rather alarming— the hold that young woman has got over our dear friend! I really think her sons ought to try and get rid of that Mrs. Wood. There is something very doubtful about her. A woman without an introduction, whose previous life no one knows anything about, whose manners and appearance are quite unsuited to the position she assumes! I will never believe she is the niece of a small shopkeeper. I was telling Colonel Egerton Griffith my candid opinion at dinner; but there is not much use in speaking to him, though he did seem to be a little impressed, for he raised his eyebrows in a contemptuous sort of way, and said he believed she was rather a dangerous sort of person. Then he laughed. As to Frank, he is quite infatuated. Don't you see it?"

"I can't say I do. Frank has naturally good taste and good manners, and is, I suppose, not absolutely rude to the lady who is so useful to his mother."

"Not absolutely rude!" cried Mrs. Egerton. "My dear sir, he was always regretting her absence, and

encouraging his mother in her absurd objections to everyone else's efforts to read or write or help in any way. I am sure I did my best."

"Oh, we all did that, and bad was the best," said Miss Ferrers, joining them and catching the last part of Mrs. Egerton's sentence. "Poor Cousin Griffith looked so much brighter this evening because Mrs. Wood has come back; and I think it is a matter of rejoicing to us all. I shall have my accompaniments played for me now—not to-night; Mrs. Wood is too tired to come down. Oh, Godfrey," as Colonel Egerton and the other gentlemen came into the room, "if it is fine to-morrow, will you take me out for a sail? We have had no boating, or scarcely any, this summer."

"Can't!" returned Colonel Griffith. "I am going to look at some horses Allerton wants to buy, at the other side of Abermethvyn. I shall not be back till dinner-time."

"Oh, well. Will you try a game of chess now?"

"Thanks, no. I have promised the Rector his revenge at billiards."

He glanced quickly round as he spoke, and then stood silent and in thought while the Rector sipped his tea.

* * * * *

Mildred was gratified by the warmth of Mrs. Griffith's reception, and was half pleased, half uneasy at finding herself once more at Pennogwen. The idea of having secured a friend, a helpful ally in Brian Leigh was less comforting in a house full of people than in the solitude of Morton Street. She feared betraying any mutual understanding, of being unguarded and rousing the suspicions of Mrs. Egerton or Colonel

Griffith, or worse, of Mrs. Griffith herself, who was keen to notice tones and inflexions of voice. She would on the first opportunity beg Leigh to avoid her as much as possible, though no doubt he would do so without her suggestion.

The day after her arrival she was in harness. Again she wrote a number of letters for Mrs. Griffith, read aloud for some hours, and went to drive with her patroness, who ordered the pony carriage, as she openly declared she wished for a *tête-à-tête*.

"Well, I am really very glad to have you back," said the blind lady as they neared the house on their return. "And I am not going to trouble you with any questions. I shall leave it to you to tell me your story when you like; but I warn you that Mrs. Egerton is dying to find out the whys and wherefores of your visit to London. She will cross-examine you on the first opportunity. I hate idle curiosity. Don't gratify her."

"I certainly shall not," returned Mildred, smiling. "If I am not disposed to talk about myself to *you*, I am not likely to confide in Mrs. Egerton."

It was rather a formidable undertaking, Mildred thought, to appear before the assembled party that first evening after her return. The incongruity of her position stood out more clearly to her mind's eye since her conversation with Leigh had brought back the atmosphere of her former life. She imagined that all must perceive she bore the stamp of a runaway wife —that her reticence must suggest guilt.

She took care to be at her post, near Mrs. Griffith's chair, before the ladies came in from dinner, hoping to resume her old unobtrusive ways without interference.

Mrs. Egerton, however, was on the watch to open the attack. The lady of the house was in a talkative mood—being much moved by the address of a Liberal candidate to the electors of Middleborough, a growing town in the territory that formerly belonged to the Egertons, before reckless extravagance had alienated their property, or nearly all of it. A few strictly entailed acres—the nucleus of their estates—were still left: enough Mrs. Griffith thought, to entitle her eldest son to oppose the objectionable new man who dared to thrust himself into his better's place.

So the lively widow found no opportunity for speaking till a few minutes before the gentlemen joined the party.

"Well, Mrs. Wood, I hope you enjoyed your visit to town," she began; "though, I suppose, it is desert just now."

"Yes, it is very empty."

Here, seeing a slight smile and a faint colour pass over Mildred's face, Mrs. Egerton turned sharply, and saw Colonel Griffith and Brian Leigh standing near each other, and both looking in her direction.

"Cunning minx," thought the widow; "I do believe she is making eyes at Egerton."

"And the telegram!—did it indicate your succession to a fortune?"

"No!"

"Nor the loss of one?"

"Nor the loss of one!"

"Then, my dear creature, what was it about?"

"My private affairs!"

"Oh! indeed! Well, I suppose you are a little more confidential with Mrs. Griffith?"

"Mrs. Griffith is satisfied, and that is enough," returned Mildred very quietly, and quite aware that Leigh had been listening eagerly from the moment he had perceived that she was under fire.

He now came to the rescue.

"Pray, Mrs. Egerton," he said, advancing with a slight bow to Mildred, and an amused expression playing in his eyes, "do you remember meeting a young fellow called Glynn—Bertie Glynn, at Cannes, last year. I had a letter from him to-day, and he asked me if Pennogwen didn't belong to some relation of a very agreeable Mrs. Egerton he had met at Cannes."

"Bertie Glynn!" cried the widow. "No! I knew a Fred Glynn—but that was at Rome. He was a cousin of Lord Kinaldy's, and hoped to be his heir."

Mrs. Egerton plunged into the complicated ramifications of the Glynn family with infinite zest—and Mildred was safe. She took advantage of this diversion to move away from the volcanic centre; but, having evaded Scylla, fell into Charybdis; for Colonel Griffith immediately took advantage of a vacant seat beside her, while Lord Allerton, who was again Mrs. Griffith's guest, devoted himself to Miss Ferrers and the lady of the house.

"I am deuced glad to see you back, Mrs. Wood," said Colonel Griffith, gazing at her with insolent admiration, which stirred Mildred to wrath. "I began to be afraid we should never see you again."

"Indeed!" finding he paused for a reply.

"Yes, London is so attractive. You were always fond of London, weren't you?"

"How do you know?" asked Mildred, looking straight and coldly into his bold eyes.

"Oh! I know more than you think!"

"Or less," she returned with great composure.

"What do you mean?"

"That your idea of having recognised me is a mistake—or an invention!" A slight defiant smile curled her lip.

"By Jove! I shall never make any mistake about you again!" he exclaimed. "You have made too deep an impression. Do you know, it was an awful nuisance to come in here of an evening and not find you?"

Profound silence on Mildred's part, and attention to her needlework.

"Ah, you don't think me worth a reply, Mrs. Wood!"

Mildred looked up for an instant, and without the smallest change in the cold composure of her face, bowed unmistakable assent.

Colonel Griffith laughed harshly.

"I admire pluck," he said; "and you show yours by steadily snubbing and defying me."

"Is there any reason why I should conciliate you?"

"Well—no; I suppose not. But why are you so unfriendly? Have you formed a bad opinion of me?"

"I have formed none."

"May I tell you the opinion I have formed of you?" asked Colonel Griffith, with kindling eyes.

"I have no wish to know——" began Mildred, when she was interrupted by Miss Ferrers.

"Do come and play for me, Mrs. Wood! Mr. Leigh has been teasing me to sing."

"With pleasure," returned Mildred, rising gladly, and feeling she owed a second deliverance to her new-found friend.

But Colonel Griffith did not accept defeat. He

followed Miss Ferrers to the piano, and contrived to talk to both musicians, conveying to Mildred, with more ingenuity than she believed him capable of, his regret at having angered or offended her.

But the evening was not yet over.

When Miss Ferrers ceased singing, Mildred returned to her seat beside Mrs. Griffith, as Frank was saying to his mother, "I had a letter from Trevor to-day."

"Ha! where is he now?" she asked.

"Still at Calcutta. He is on General Harrison's staff, so will escape some horrid station up country, where the regiment is likely to be sent."

"Is that the Captain Trevor I met here one autumn?" asked Gwendoline. "A bright, pleasant man, who danced very well?"

"The same; his regiment went to India last year."

"Trevor was present at that horrible Chamouni business last year, wasn't he?" said Colonel Griffith, coming across the room to lounge on a sofa near the speakers.

Mildred drew gently back behind into the shadow of Mrs. Griffith's large easy chair.

"Of course he was!" cried Mrs. Egerton. "I remember meeting him just after it occurred, and I never saw a man so changed. He seemed quite unable to recover himself. They *say*, you know, that he was desperately smitten with that poor Mrs. Welby, and that she reciprocated. Indeed, some went so far as to say it was despair at her entanglement drove her to the rash act; which would account——"

"No—no! why should it?" interrupted Colonel Griffith. "I imagine a pleasant admirer with plenty of

go in him like Trevor would be more likely to attach a woman to life than to frighten her out of it."

"That is a regular old woman's tale," exclaimed Leigh. "Trevor knew very little of Mrs. Welby or her husband. It is too bad to take away the character of the dead!"

"Yes, it is too bad!" said Frank. "I knew Trevor most intimately, and saw him every day before he went out to India; and I am certain that he felt neither more nor less than any man of decent feeling would for a charming young woman whose tragical death took place under his very eyes. He never said she committed suicide."

"Of course he did not!" retorted Mrs. Egerton, with a sneer. "But it was generally believed to have been suicide at the time. Why, I cannot tell; for the poor husband, I am told, adored her, and lavished his wealth upon her. He is very rich, I believe, but a Dissenter of some kind; so one knows very little about him."

"Well, I assure you," cried Miss Ferrers, "I heard on excellent authority that he was a cruel wretch, and behaved abominably—made a complete servant of his wife, and never gave her an allowance!"

"Why, where in the world did you hear that gossip, Gwendoline?" asked Mrs. Griffith.

"From an undoubted source," returned Miss Ferrers, unabashed; "one of the housemaids at Lady Pemberton's had been in Mrs. Welby's service, and she told my maid. I am sure if she had such a horror of a husband, she was right to console herself with the friendship of an agreeable man like Captain Trevor."

"Really, Gwen!" said Colonel Griffith languidly, "your morals appal me!"

"Where did young Trevor know these people?" said Mrs. Griffith, as if the meeting of the opposite poles might be more easily accounted for.

"At St. Hubert's," said Frank, "he was quartered there, and Mrs. Welby's father had a place in the neighbourhood; their name was Carr; don't you remember Lady Mary talking of them?—she said Mrs. Carr was quite a gentlewoman, and belonged to a good Border family."

"I believe I do remember."

"I see," exclaimed Leigh, seizing a newspaper, and pouncing on a fresh topic, "I see that Wandesforde—Hugh Wandesforde—is talked of as another candidate for Middleborough."

"He is a Conservative, is he not?" asked Mr. Ferrers, and the stream of conversation was turned.

Soon Mrs. Griffith bid her guests good-night, and asked for Mildred's arm as usual.

This discussion of her own death, these assertions that her very slight and short acquaintance with Trevor was tinged by any feeling stronger than friendly good-will, was a painful trial of Mildred's courage and selfcontrol. But, secure in her conscious innocence, she could smile at such absurd insinuations, while she pondered very seriously on the danger of a possible meeting with Trevor, should he return before Time's disguising hand should have changed her beyond the power of memory to recognise. Of this she thought long and uneasily before she could compose herself to sleep.

"I am getting sick of this," said Colonel Griffith, when the gentlemen had retired to the smoking-room; "I'll be off to Scotland next week."

"Did you find out the mystery of that telegram Mrs. Egerton was so curious to unravel?" asked Lord Allerton with a smile; "I saw you in deep converse with the interesting secretary."

"I found out I was a blockhead, and incapable of cross-examining."

"Fortunately you do not need that power in your profession," observed Leigh carelessly—understanding that Mildred had managed to extinguish Colonel Griffith.

* * * * *

The next day Mrs. Griffith had a formidable amount of work for her secretary to accomplish; she dictated long letters to her solicitor, and to a legal friend, who appeared to be conversant with electioneering tactics, putting many queries to both correspondents, as to the probable cost of an election, the best agent to employ, and other questions of the same nature. Her imagination was quite inflamed with the idea of inducing her eldest son to oppose the Liberal candidate for Middleborough, and even Mildred was so far infected that she hoped Colonel Griffith would not disappoint his mother. But the object of these aspirations had gone out early with his special guest, Lord Allerton, and was not expected till dinner-time. Mrs. Griffith was, therefore, compelled to postpone her appeal to his ambition and patriotism till the next day.

Frank Griffith was lounging on the steps when Mrs. Griffith and her secretary drove up to the door that afternoon. It had been a showery unsettled day, and the blind lady felt chilled and damp.

"Take me to my room at once, Frank," she said,

as she took her son's arm. "I will have a cup of tea there, and rest till dinner-time."

As he turned to conduct his mother upstairs, Frank gave Mildred so earnest a look, that she thought he must want to speak with her. As yet she had hardly exchanged a word with him. She therefore went to Mrs. Griffith's sitting-room, and taking off her cloak, applied herself to arrange the books and newspapers ready for the evening. In a few minutes Frank Griffith joined her.

"I am glad I've caught you," he exclaimed; "I want so much to speak to you, and I am going off the day after to-morrow. Glad to see you looking so well, too! I know you have kindly interested yourself in my affairs, so I want to tell you that I am going straight away North to spend a week or two near Carlisle. My fiancée is down there with her grandmother: has been for some time; but I didn't like to go till my future father-in-law had cleared out."

"I imagined he was very friendly to you," observed Mildred.

Frank shook his head.

"'A change has come over the spirit of his dream.' I am afraid his affairs are not flourishing; but my little Dolly will read me the riddle, when we have had a talk. I am going to look up all my influential friends and relatives, and see if I can't get some appointment before I break the news to my mother—when of course she will break with *me*."

"It will be dreadful!" returned Mildred. "I feel for you both."

"Yes, I confess I dread it; but I will not attempt to postpone my confession, once my mother is settled

in town. I don't fancy Miss Burton is too happy at home, and I am most anxious, not altogether for selfish reasons, to have the right to take care of her."

"I don't think you are selfish," said Mildred, with a kind smile. "It seems wonderful to me to see you so regardless of worldly advantages in your marriage. I hope you will never repent what you are about to do—or at least let your wife see that you repent."

"I am afraid you have a poor opinion of me, Mrs. Wood! Wait a while, and you will see what a pattern husband I shall be. You must be friends with Dolly when she is Mrs. Frank Griffith."

"How much I should like to know her!" cried Mildred, flushing, and then growing pale at the thought that she scarcely dared indulge in such pleasant friendships, even if offered to her; the barrier between herself and honest, simple, law-abiding women was too wide, too high, to be easily over-passed.

"And she is equally anxious to know you," added Frank.

"I must not stay longer," said Mildred. "So good-bye, and all good wishes for your happiness and success."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wood! On the whole, I am not afraid of the future; but—I wish I were not obliged to vex my poor mother, as I am bound to do, by my choice."

"May all end well!" said Mildred, as she shook hands with him and left the room.

Colonel Griffith acceded very reluctantly to his mother's desire that he should attend her in her special room as soon as he had seen Lord Allerton drive off.

Leigh was also summoned; and Mildred, to her infinite relief, was ordered to be at hand in the library.

The time went slowly. She knew there would be a struggle between Mrs. Griffith and her son, and she did not for a moment suppose that her wishes would have any weight with him.

It seemed strange to her, the lack of love in the Egerton-Griffith family. Then her thoughts flew back to the autumn two years ago, and her heart swelled as she pictured the wretchedness of those bitter days —her sweet mother pining, dying, with patient uncomplaining courage, in the dull bedroom, which was all Welby would spare out of his abundance, while she wore out her spirit chafing against the fetters that held her "fast bound in misery and iron."

Plunged in these cruel memories, she dropped her work, and sat quite still—her hands clasped on her knee, her face slightly raised, her eyes gazing far away, and darkened with an expression of an unutterable sadness, her whole attitude profoundly despondent. She had left the door open, expecting every moment to be summoned, and she did not hear Leigh come in. He paused before speaking, struck by her pose. Often as he had thought of her strange position, its terrible isolation had never before presented itself to his imagination with such force, such distinctness.

What was to become of her—so young, so fair, and in his eyes so infinitely attractive? But some consciousness that she was not alone made Mildred turn her eyes to him, and the spell was broken.

"Mrs. Griffith is alone, and wishes for you," said Leigh, approaching and leaning his shoulder against the embrasure of the window near which she sat.

"And the interview has been——?" asked Mildred, and paused.

"Most stormy!" said Leigh, answering her unfinished question. "Godfrey positively refuses to enter political life. His mother is greatly incensed, and has ordered him to leave the house. Neither mother nor son has much indulgence for the other's idiosyncrasies; yet she is fond of him, and he——"

"Is fond of himself," added Mildred.

"He is—therefore my sympathies are with his mother. But she is deeply indignant, and has ordered him to quit the house to-morrow. You will find her greatly disturbed."

Mildred rose, and folded up her strip of embroidery.

"One moment, Mrs. Wood," said Leigh, looking earnestly into her eyes. "I have a warning to give you. The Liberal candidate for Middleborough is—Mr. Welby."

Mildred grew pale.

"There is no chance of our meeting?" she asked after a moment's pause. "I am still safe here."

"Perfectly safe," returned Leigh. "I only wished to prepare you for hearing a name that must always try your self-control."

"I thank you; it is a valuable hint."

"Yet another word," said Leigh, smiling, as she began to move away. "And you must forgive me if I seem intrusive. Have you written to your brother, telling him you are still in life?"

"Not yet," she replied with a slight deprecatory movement of the head.

"Why not? It is the right thing to do. What is

your objection?" asked Leigh, and Mildred thought his voice sounded harsh.

"I do not like to write until I, that is Mrs. Leavett, has another letter from him. It is more than four months since we had the last. One from me might fall into Mr. Gribble's hand, perhaps, in my brother's absence. And I always feel afraid of what Mr. Gribble might do. As soon as we hear again, and know that Arthur will be stationary, I shall write. I long, yet dread, to do so!"

"That I can understand. I grant it is a terrible experiment to confess yourself on paper. I wish Carr would come home."

"Ah, yes. Once face to face, I could tell my dear brother anything. But I must not stay."

"And you will not fail to let me know if you hear, and what you hear, from him?"

"I will not, indeed. I am most grateful to you for caring to know."

"You cannot doubt my sincere—my deep interest in all that concerns you," said Leigh in a low tone, as he stepped back to let her pass.

The sudden departure of Colonel Griffith seemed to be a signal for the break-up of the Pennogwen party. Frank followed next day, and Miss Ferrers began to talk of engagements in the North, while Mrs. Egerton, complaining of rheumatic twinges, was full of winter plans, and of "flying South."

Mrs. Griffith was taciturn and grim. To Mildred she made no mention of her disappointment. She was not even querulous. The only sign she showed her secretary of the storm was to dictate two short decisive letters to the gentlemen from whom she had asked in-

formation respecting electioneering tactics, stating that she no longer needed their advice or assistance in this matter.

Mildred was deeply moved by the tragic aspect of the proud old woman, sitting blind and silent in her stately home, surrounded by all that wealth and high station could give her, yet helpless and poverty-stricken as regarded those treasures of love and sympathy without which life is blank, arid, icy—rejecting the love of one son, and unable to compel the obedience of the other; and yet not so heartless as to be indifferent to either.

The lady of Pennogwen had sufficient keenness of perception to recognise something more than could well be described by words in Mildred's thoughtful care and observance, in the gentleness of her tone, the softness of her touch, the extreme respect of her manner; and the proud embittered woman was touched, in spite of herself, by the silent sympathy of her independent secretary.

Mrs. Egerton, on the contrary, who presumed to express her indignation and surprise at Colonel Griffith's conduct, lost ground. She was left at home when Mrs. Griffith drove out; her offers of assistance were summarily rejected; her stories listened to without observation or applause; and Mildred was not surprised one morning, when passing Mrs. Egerton's open door, to see that lady's maid on her knees packing a large box.

"I shall not be sorry to have my house to myself," said Mrs. Griffith as she was bidding Mildred good-night, when the latter had as usual conducted her to her room. "I was much more comfortable before

these people came. If the weather keeps tolerably fine, I shall stay here till the beginning of November. We shall be better by ourselves."

Mildred left her with a feeling of relief that the company season was well nigh over; and in the corridor almost ran against Gwendoline Ferrers.

"Oh, Mrs. Wood! I was just going to your room. May I come in and have a little talk? I never have a word with you now, and we go away to-morrow."

"Pray come in," replied Mildred, opening her door.

"How nice and pretty and tidy your room is, though you have no maid!" cried Gwendoline suddenly, sitting down on the floor, and resting her head against a chair. "You must take a great deal of trouble."

"I don't think I do."

"I wish you would tell me all about yourself!" cried Gwendoline impulsively. "I am sure you have quite a three-volume-novel of a story."

"Don't you think," returned Mildred, smiling, for she had a kindly feeling of indulgence, as towards a pretty, spoiled child, for the little heiress—"Don't you think it is a little impertinent, and not particularly well-bred, to display your curiosity so unreservedly?"

"I suppose it is rude," reflectively. "But I really like you, and I do believe you might look quite handsome if you had a decent dressmaker. Why do you go about like a Sister of Mercy?"

"I only want to pass unnoticed, and not to be absolutely unpleasant to look at."

"Oh, you are not unpleasant to look at—at any rate, Frank Griffith doesn't think so. I can see far

enough sometimes, though they all think me a little goose."

"Miss Ferrers," cried Mildred, flushing up, with a curious outraged feeling, "your insinuation is cruel! You are no fool; and you must be conscious that anything of—of what you hint at from a man in Mr. Griffith's class is an insult to a woman in mine. But," checking herself, "I know you often talk thoughtlessly, and I am throwing away my heroics on you!"

"Yes, you are!" looking fixedly at her. "But you can be very angry, I see. Well, I am sorry I vexed you—I didn't intend it; and I don't understand feeling cross about being admired. I like admiration *always*—from *any* one."

"Were you in my place you would feel as I do, Miss Ferrers."

"I will tell you who tries to make me understand that he admires *me* very much—Lord Allerton. He is rather nice. Of course my money would be of the greatest use to him (his property is awfully encumbered, you know); but I think he likes me for myself too."

"That I can quite understand," said Mildred heartily.

"I believe you like me too!" cried Miss Ferrers, taking a cushion from the chair, and curling herself on the floor with her head upon it. "Now, some people dislike me very much, which I can't understand." A short pause. "I sometimes think Godfrey dislikes me."

"I don't think he can."

"Well, I do—I would rather think so. I'd rather he hated me than see him indifferent; and—who knows?—perhaps his dislike is put on."

"It is not likely. Colonel Griffith is too proud and self-confident to put on anything."

"Yes! isn't he haughty and grand-looking?—quite different from other men! It would be something to make a conquest of him!"

"Do you think so?" with slight surprise.

"Yes, I do. I would give my all to see him 'at my feet,' as the phrase is! Why, I am madly in love with Godfrey! Don't look at me with such big, astonished eyes. I am not the first woman that has fallen in love with him."

"I don't like to hear you say so. Forgive me, dear Miss Ferrers; but a man of Colonel Griffith's character—hard, cold, selfish—would make any woman miserable."

"Is he all that? Perhaps he is."

"Then try and put him out of your head."

"Oh no! I shall love him all the same. It would be too calculating and rational to put him out of my head because he is neither a saint nor an angel."

"It would be better for you."

"Pray, were you ever in love, Mrs. Wood? You don't talk as if you had been. Let us say no more about it."

A pause; and then Miss Ferrers resumed:

"You would have been amused to see how Godfrey gave Lady Mary Dacre the cold shoulder. Lady Mary was here for ten days while you were away. She is an awful flirt. But she ought to give up now; her eldest son is of age. She used to be quite a leader of society; but they are ruined now, and obliged to live abroad. Some people used to shake their heads over Lady Mary."

"Why, what has she done?" asked Mildred.

"I don't know. She can be quite charming—at least, she was to me. I suppose I must not keep you up any longer," continued Miss Ferrers, rising from her lowly position and wandering to the dressing-table, where she looked earnestly at herself in the glass. "But I wish you would tell me before I go if you think Colonel Griffith cares for me at all—if he is hiding his real feelings, or—— Oh, I do wish he would take a fancy to me!"

"I am no judge of such men as Colonel Griffith, Miss Ferrers."

"Nonsense! Lookers-on see most of the game; and you are always looking on. Besides, I know you have an opinion. Come, tell me!"

"I should be very glad if you would banish Colonel Griffith from your heart or mind. He cares for no one but himself; and you deserve a better fate than to succeed in rousing his fancy. You will see others who are much more worthy of you. Besides, you ought to have too much pride to seek a man who has not the least affection or even liking for you."

"You think so?" turning and facing Mildred. "Well, you'll see. I will bring Godfrey to my feet yet!"

"He is not worth the trouble, believe me; Lord Allerton is infinitely more to be liked."

"Why are you so dead against Godfrey? I have half a mind to tell him."

"If you choose to be treacherous, Miss Ferrers, I cannot help it."

"Yes, it would be abominably treacherous, and I am not a traitor. Good-night, Mrs. Wood."

A few days more, and Mrs. Griffith, her secretary,

and her favourite kinsman were the only members of the party left in the big quiet house.

But the blind lady did not soon recover the angry resentment her son's refusal to comply with her wishes called forth; she was stern, silent, and at times very irritable.

Nevertheless, the evenings were pleasant to Mildred; Brian Leigh was scarcely seen during the day, but when night came, and the lamps were lit in Mrs. Griffith's comfortable, beautiful sitting-room, he almost always offered to read aloud, while Mildred worked diligently. Often at some passage, or some sentiment which touched, or struck both, they would exchange a smile, a glance of mutual understanding, of reciprocity, which made silence an expressive medium of communication.

It was a breathing space of tranquillity and safety, and for awhile Mildred ceased to think of the future.

CHAPTER III.

The end of this peaceful period was at hand.

One crisp evening early in October the Rector and Mrs. Watkin had dined at Pennogwen, and Mildred was glad to see Mrs. Griffith less sombre and silent than she had been since her eldest son had left her. She was a good deal interested in Mrs. Watkin's account of the species of crusade in which one of the curates had engaged, against Dissent and Radicalism, in a village at some miles distance. The lady of the manor proposed, as a mark of approbation, to call upon this militant parson and his newly married wife, the following day, and invited her informant to accompany her.

The Rector was soon drawn into the conversation, as the Curate in question was an especial favourite with him, and he was proud of his progress.

Brian Leigh had taken up an illustrated paper on entering the drawing-room, and now crossed to where Mildred was sitting:

"Some of these sketches are uncommonly good, are they not?" he said, showing them to her. "But they are very unequal. Do you see the initials P.W., in the corner of these two, which are incomparably the best? I have secured the artist to illustrate my forthcoming book, and I am going up to town to see how he is going on—the day after to-morrow—but

more especially to meet Frank Griffith. I believe I have yielded too long and too readily to the attraction of Pennogwen."

"But you have been working all the time, have you not?"

"Yes—I have salved my conscience with some kind of scribbling," he returned, smiling. "Now I must leave the peaceful valley and go into the battle."

He drew a chair between Mildred and the others, saying quickly, in a low voice:

"I must find an opportunity of speaking to you before I go."

Mildred looked up, attentive, but not disturbed.

"Why?"

"I will explain afterwards. There is a chance to-morrow. When Mrs. Griffith goes out with Mrs. Watkin, you must (if you will be so good) take a walk down the glen, towards the sea—promise me you will?"

There was a mingled expression of entreaty and command in his eyes.

"I promise," said Mildred, with a slight smile at his eagerness.

"If it is wet, Mrs. Griffith will not go out, and I will postpone my departure," continued Leigh. "I cannot go till I have spoken to you!"

"I hope it will be fine!" said Mildred, with some significance, after a moment's pause.

Leigh began to talk lightly and pleasantly of illustrations generally—of the latest political news, and various subjects—till Mrs. Griffith asked for music, and their conversation was put a stop to.

It was with no small anxiety that Mildred looked from her window next morning, to scan the aspect of

the weather—a grave, sunless sky, and soft, tranquil air, promised one of those clear grey autumnal days that have a beauty of their own. She had been long enough a denizen of Pennogwen to understand the signs of the weather, and perceived that it promised to be still and rainless, like calm, dignified, uncomplaining old age.

The glen would be sweet with the odour of the pines and larches, and hushed into a tender solemnity, while the winds slept and the waves rested. How ardently she longed for the hour of quiet talk with Leigh! Then, like some wandering disembodied spirit she would be permitted for a few moments to reassume her former existence, and speak and move and be as she once was. This was so intense a pleasure, that she could spare small thought to the agent who caused it. She was grateful to him for his delicate consideration, but as yet she thought more of her own relief and delight in daring to be herself with Leigh, than of him.

Nor did she expend many conjectures on what he might want to say. It was no doubt some piece of information respecting Frank Griffith, whom he expected to meet in London; there could be nothing else, unless, indeed, he had heard some news of Arthur, and that was most improbable.

The day fulfilled Mildred's anticipations. It was dry, clear, and softly grey. Mrs. Watkin came to luncheon, and directly that meal was over, Mrs. Griffith and her guest started on their expedition. It was with some misgiving that Mildred put on a black toque and dark waterproof cloak in preparation for her walk, as she had heard the butler tell Mrs. Griffith that Mr.

Leigh had gone out early to the Garth woods and that he would not return till dusk. Still, he would not fail her, she thought, as she sallied forth accompanied by Gelert; and after a short détour in the grounds, directed her steps to the gate which opened on the upper end of the glen.

A few paces brought her to a turn, rounding which she saw Leigh, disembarrassed of dogs, gun, and game-keeper, advancing slowly towards her; at first glance he suddenly reminded her of Trevor, but this, she soon perceived, was probably owing to the similarity between his shooting costume and the garb in which she had last seen Trevor; as he drew nearer she noticed that though little taller than her former acquaintance, he had a firmer, stronger, more imposing aspect, and though considerably less good-looking, his strong face expressed thought and resolution in a higher degree than Trevor's.

"I began to fear that some change of Mrs. Griffith's plans might have frustrated mine," he said, raising his hat as he came up and turned to walk beside her.

"Waiting always seems long! I came as soon as I could. You can well imagine what a pleasure it is to speak to you frankly and safely—to be my own self for a little while," replied Mildred with a grave smile, looking straight at him without a shade of embarrassment, as if her peculiar position, her strange experience, had swept from her all the films of small hesitations and petty coquetries which drape happier women.

"Yes—I can well understand it," he returned; and they walked on for a minute in silence.

"You are going to meet Mr. Griffith?" resumed Mildred.

"I am. One of my reasons for wishing to speak to you privately is to arrange how I can tell you of my interview with his lady-love. I am to be presented to her as soon as I go to town. She has returned to the paternal roof, and poor Frank's happy days are over for the present. Besides, Mrs. Wood, it would be well to have some means of communication; you might want me, and you know I am really at your service."

"Do you pity me very much, that you are so good?" asked Mildred, the tears welling up in her large dark eyes. "Yes, you must write to me; but it will not do to send me letters addressed by yourself."

"Certainly not; nor by any other, except your own. You must give me some envelopes directed by yourself."

"I will; I often have letters from Koo—from Mrs. Leavett—which I have addressed."

"Of course there will be nothing remarkable in letters from you to me," returned Leigh; "as Mrs. Griffith's secretary, you must often write to me. But I do hope, you *will* let me hear from you occasionally," he added earnestly. "It may be a relief to write, as it is to speak; and I promise to destroy every line of your writing."

"Oh, I shall be very glad to write to you, Mr. Leigh; only I must not trespass too much on your kindness. One day I hope my dear brother will thank you better than I can."

"You owe me no thanks," said Leigh, with a slight sigh. "Now, Mrs. Wood, about your brother; I have written to Trevor for news of him."

"Ah! What did you say?"

"Nothing to alarm you; I merely asked if he were still in Calcutta, and how he was situated generally. You shall know the answer as soon as I get it; but Trevor is not the best of correspondents."

"That is well. I shall surely soon get tidings of Arthur. He will write to Koo. He may be long, but he will certainly write."

"And when you hear?" asked Leigh, and paused.

"If there is no unfavourable change in his position —I mean unfavourable for me—I will confess all to him."

"I do not think you will regret it."

"Tell me," resumed Mildred, "if Mr. Welby discovered me, next year, or in two or three years, what could he do? You are a lawyer: you must know."

"He could compel you to return to him."

Mildred shuddered.

"It is not likely he would do so, considering the strong proof you have given of your dislike to him," continued Leigh.

"I do not know—it is impossible to say," exclaimed Mildred. "He would like to punish me by proving his power; but he would shrink from the scandal of my return. Return to him—no! I will do anything, however desperate, first!"

"Anything!" repeated Leigh slowly, as he looked intently at her.

But she did not heed him; she was gazing with affrighted eyes at the horror her imagination had conjured up.

"He must not discover you," said Leigh, in his usual tone; "yet you are always more or less in danger. If I might suggest my own idea, I should say you

would be safer abroad than in England. Have you ever thought of taking refuge—in Paris, for instance?"

"Never. I know no one there."

"That would be the best place for you; reflect upon it. I have a Parisian friend, an artist, whose wife, a simple, kindly, good woman, would gladly receive unquestioned anyone recommended by me."

"Ah!—no, no! I will never quit Mrs. Leavett—that is, unless obliged; there is something of home about her dwelling and herself. I could not leave her!"

She clasped her hands in unconscious entreaty, and her lips quivered.

Leigh kept his eyes on the ground, and did not speak.

"Then," resumed Mildred, "I feel less brave since —since that cruel conversation—you remember it?—the night after I returned. I want my brother to know everything—where I have been, and what I have done. It is too horrible to think that name and fame are alike blotted out—that there is no one to live for."

"Yes!" cried Leigh; "I suffered tortures while all that vulgar gossip was going on, knowing what you must feel. But it was not worth a thought. No man is so honourable, no woman so pure, that scandal cannot touch them; and anyone who knows you would never for a moment credit the faintest whisper——"

"Against *me*? Perhaps not," she interrupted; "but it was basely unjust to so true a gentleman as Captain Trevor. What could any man worthy the name be, but brotherly and generous to so miserable a creature as I was then?"

"*Then*," repeated Leigh; "you are less miserable now?"

"Much less miserable. I am comparatively free—free from a presence that oppressed and degraded me, from the sound of a voice that was only used to distress and mortify me; from——" She paused, shuddering. Leigh's cheek flushed darkly red, and they walked on for a moment in silence. "It gave me a thrill of terror when I heard of Mr. Welby being opposed to Colonel Griffith in that election," resumed Mildred. "It seemed to bring him so near me. But I suppose even if Colonel Griffith had not refused the contest, there would have been small chance of our meeting."

"None whatever. Mrs. Griffith would as soon admit a gorilla into her sacred presence as a Liberal who dared to contest Middleborough. There is, however, a faint possibility that you might meet Lord Fitzhugh; but I am not sure. I will try and find out his movements. Trust me to take all possible precaution."

"You have saved me already! But what shall I do if you go away to this exhibition at Brussels I heard Mrs. Griffith speak of?"

"I shall not go away," said Leigh quietly.

"I hope not; but Mrs. Griffith mentioned your having some commission."

"I have recommended another man."

"At any rate," continued Mildred, "I must not look beyond myself for safety and defence."

"Believe me, you will need help," said Leigh impressively; "and believe me also, you would be safer and better hidden away in Paris."

"Ah, that will be my last resource. For the present,

I must wait with patience. Tell me more about Mr. Griffith."

"His last letter was less rapturous than the first. He thinks his future father-in-law is growing impatient and uneasy, and is by no means so friendly as before. Moreover, Frank fears from various signs that things generally are going wrong with him. I am very uneasy about Frank. He has been inconsiderate both for himself and the girl he loves. If he were independent I should not care, but——"

"*You* would not be so foolish?"

"I don't know. At present, I think I should hesitate before I dragged any woman into such a scrape as a poor unequal marriage. But I had better not boast——"

"They may be very happy," said Mildred.

"I am sure I hope so. At all events, Mrs. Wood, I will write you a description of my interview with the *fiancée*. And you will let me hear from you sometimes?"

"I will. Now I must return to the house."

"Not yet!" cried Leigh, looking at his watch. "Mrs. Griffith cannot be back for another hour. You can quite safely walk down to the beach and back to the gate."

They strolled slowly towards the sea, sometimes speaking of Arthur, of St. Hubert's, of Gribble, and the view he might take as to what Mildred ought to do; often silent with a delicious sense of companionship and mutual understanding, inhaling the soft briny air and listening to the gentle rush of the little brooklet, which to-day seemed to babble less busily, and to flow with a pathetic murmur.

"I rather imagine Mrs. Griffith will not remain here

after the first week of November, so I hope to see you before long. *Then* you must read my book. That is a sacrifice to friendship which I expect."

"And which I am quite ready to make," returned Mildred with a bright smile—a smile such as Leigh remembered since the "long ago" that seemed so far away. They were close to the gate, and she paused. "I must go in now, Mr. Leigh. Thank you for your good counsel."

"You will not forget the envelopes," said Leigh earnestly. "There will be plenty of opportunities to give them to me this evening."

"Yes; it is not difficult to deceive the blind," said Mildred sadly.

"And it would be weak and foolish not to take measures of self-defence," he returned. "Courage, my dear Mrs. Wood! I hope yet to see you out of all your troubles."

He held out his hand, and she put hers into it.

"'Yet' is very indefinite. I find the only means of preserving my fortitude is never to look beyond the day after to-morrow. Good-bye. I shall expect your letter with interest."

Leigh bowed, and held the gate open for her to pass through; then, resting his arms on the top of it, he looked long and thoughtfully after her, admiring the easy grace of her movements, the indescribable harmony of her figure, recalling her tone as she said, "What could any man worthy the name be, but brotherly and generous to a creature so miserable as I was?" What, indeed! And what a wonderful charm hung round her! What an irresistible attraction! How was their friendship to end? Friendship! Leigh was

not a man to cheat himself with words. At present Mildred was wrapped about with the shroud-like consciousness that she was not as other women, that she had passed through the dark valley and was not to be touched or approached by human passion. But this frame of mind could not last, and what would be the end thereof? A misty vapour of hope and fear, tinged with the glow of fires kindling slowly, furtively under the quiet surface of his self-control, rose up to cloud any possible answer.

* * * * *

In another day, Mildred and her blind patroness had the great rambling house all to themselves. Mrs. Griffith declared that Leigh's departure had created a solitude.

"I could do without all the rest," she said; "but I miss Brian. Though he makes but indifferent use of it in some directions, he has reason; in fact, he is more sympathetic to me than the other boys, and yet he opposes me in matters of great importance. I wonder how he came to have such a leaning to the 'rascal multitude!' But for that, I should try to get him into Parliament."

"Perhaps he cannot help his opinions," said Mildred, seeing she waited for a reply.

"Then his reason is at fault. Reason ought to be the supreme judge of all things, uninfluenced by physical or imaginative tendencies."

Mildred smiled while she kept silent.

"Besides," resumed Mrs. Griffith, "I always like to talk to a man! There is a certain variety in their views—in their way of reaching conclusions—that interests me. You are a very intelligent and fairly well-

educated young woman; indeed, your cultivation puzzles me; but you don't supply Brian Leigh's place."

"That I can quite understand," returned Mildred cordially, so cordially that Mrs. Griffith remarked:

"He was always very nice to you. I thought his manner particularly good, quietly cordial, and not *empressé*—just what it ought to be to a person *I* favour."

"All in your house have treated me with kindness and respect," said Mildred. "You are a keen observer, Mrs. Griffith."

"Ah! I can see and do nothing now! I am helpless! I often think, had I my sight, I would soon make you out."

"I wish you had," said Mildred warmly, softly.

"What! to penetrate your disguise?"

"I am not disguised! nor should I regret your knowing my history—but not just yet. I am grateful to you for caring to know!"

"Are you? That's well. I think you may venture to trust me—*I* am no gossip."

It was a curious impulse that prompted Mildred's reply. She really had at times an inclination to tell her secret to Mrs. Griffith, with whom she had a certain amount of sympathy; but she always resisted this inclination, for she was by no means convinced of the stately old lady's freedom from a weakness for gossip.

The weather had broken up, and a few wild, wet, stormy days had prevented Mrs. Griffith from taking her usual exercise. She was consequently depressed and dissatisfied—displeased because Godfrey had not written, and uneasy because she could not account for Frank's choice of London as an abode at so dead a season. She began to talk of returning to town; and

had gone so far as to issue commands to the housekeeper, preparatory to that event.

Mildred's place under these circumstances was no sinecure. She had rarely a moment to herself till Mrs. Griffith retired for the night, which was usually at a very early hour. She was almost surprised at the eagerness with which she looked for Leigh's promised letter, and felt ashamed of her own disappointment when one from Mrs. Leavett, addressed in her own writing, misled her expectations. It was but for a moment; then she read her faithful friend's short affectionate epistle with her usual zest.

Mrs. Leavett had been to Dover from Friday to Monday, which was a great refreshment, and left Dick there with an old friend who kept a very respectable lodging-house. Things were going on much as usual —quiet and steady, thank God. When was her dear young lady coming back? She wouldn't surely go on living with the family when they were again in Eccleston Square?

"No," thought Mildred, "I must make that clear, for I fear Mrs. Griffith will want me to reside with her; and I cannot forego the morsel of home which I enjoy of an evening with Koo."

It was more than a week before Leigh's expected letter reached her. Nor could she find an undisturbed interval in which to read it, until she was released for the night.

At last, safely locked into her own room, Mildred sat down with a keen sense of pleasure to read the lines traced by her friend—her only friend in the outer world.

Leigh at once went into his subject. The visit to

Frank's *fiancée* had been delayed for a few days, and had been accomplished only the day before he wrote. Leigh acknowledged that he had been more pleased with Miss Dolly than he expected to be.

"She is certainly a pretty girl—a dark-haired, dark-eyed edition of Gwen Ferrers, with more repose of manner, rather timid and shy, but not ungraceful, and has an honest, kindly little face. Frank is not without a fair excuse for his imprudence. I had got over the first difficulties of making conversation (and they were considerable) when Burton *père* made his appearance. He was stiff, cold, uneasy, and by no means cordial to his intended son-in-law. After a short interchange of nothings, he dismissed his daughter, saying he wished 'to speak with these gentlemen.' This appalling announcement led up to a discussion of the state of affairs between Frank and Miss Burton. Mr. B. is evidently displeased at the uncertainty of his daughter's future, and insists that the engagement should be made known to Mrs. Griffith as soon as she returns to town. If she consents, and makes a settlement on her son, the 'Heavy Father' is ready to bestow his blessing; if not, he is indisposed to encourage opposition to a parent in so vital a matter as marriage; finally, he begged Mr. Griffith to abstain from visiting at the house till this important question was finally settled. He did not object to an occasional letter, but the constant visits of a young man created gossip, etc., etc. Frank came away awfully downcast. I must say things look rather blue for him. I don't like the Herr Papa; he doesn't look you straight in the face; he is inclined to bully; at the same time he seems to me insecure,

as though he had some hidden dread. I confess he is the worst feature in the case. Frank thinks some one has been making mischief. I am a good deal cut up about the whole affair. I heartily wish Frank had kept out of it. If he had worked himself into an independent position, he could exercise his undoubted right to choose a wife for himself. I fear the engagement means a prolonged trial to his nice little *fiancée*, as well as to himself, and no very distinct prospect of a happy termination.

"Time may have some solution hidden away in the future—may it prove a happy one!

"I fancy Pennogwen must be dreary enough in this weather. I trust you do not allow its dreariness to pervade your own outlook. When I have the pleasure of again discussing your plans with you I will show you there is not so much to dread in the future as you seem to think! If not too much trouble, pray let me have a few lines. I must not trespass longer upon your time. Believe me, in no ordinary, formal sense,

"Yours faithfully,

"BRIAN LEIGH."

Mildred read this letter rapidly with keenest interest, and immediately reperused it more slowly, but not less eagerly. She was very, very sorry for Frank Griffith, but glad that in the calm judgment of a critical friend his young *fiancée* appeared worthy of him. Of all the troubles clustering round the young son, none were comparable to the misery of an unsuitable wife. Marriage, if not happy, was so unspeakably wretched.

And Mr. Leigh himself—how kind and thoughtful he was! How fortunate that the only one who recog-

nised her proved faithful and true—a real friend—a sort of legacy from her brother and Trevor—and the last happy hour of her first life!

He would be kind and wise, and counsel her, and she would be guided by his advice; only she dare not yet reveal herself to Arthur—not just yet. If she could only be sure what he would do—be satisfied to take her to live with him, and make no attempt to reinstate her? or insist on revealing all, and endeavouring to obtain a separation from Welby, which might end—oh, merciful God!—in her being forced to live with him again? But no! such a fate would embolden her to face the great unknown. The very thought made her cold and faint.

This letter—indeed, the whole episode of her encounter with Leigh—seemed like a return to life—a renewal of her former existence. Write to him? Yes, of course she would, gladly; and though the days at Pennogwen were monotonous enough, her mind and heart seemed overflowing with topics whereon to enlarge.

It was with regret that after again studying the letter—indeed, almost committing it to memory—she tore it into morsels, and watched them consume away on the hearth.

To answer this was a pleasant task. Mildred, however, carefully restrained her pen, and only permitted herself to write a note of thanks, which she enclosed in a letter dictated by Mrs. Griffith.

The day fixed for her return to town by the lady of the manor drew near; and, as if to make her regret her approaching departure, the weather cleared, and November put on the aspect of a sunny August.

Mrs. Griffith now took her airing between breakfast and luncheon, instead of in the afternoon. The newspaper-reading was therefore postponed till later; and it was already growing dusk one afternoon just before their departure, when Mrs. Griffith, having despatched her letters, asked for the *Times*.

"Begin at the beginning, Mrs. Wood; we have hurried over our papers of late."

Mildred rang for lights, and set herself to read steadily from the "Births" to the last paragraph of occasional intelligence. At the end of the "Marriages" she read, in an unchanged voice, but with a quickened pulse. "'On the 10th instant, at Brownlow Hill Chapel, George B. Reynolds, Esq., son of the late Rev. B. Reynolds, Vicar of St. Cuthbert's, Highbury, to Elizabeth, second daughter of Mark Welby, Esq., of Brownlow Gardens, Hyde Park. No cards.'"

So dear merry Lizzie was married to the good-looking engineer of whom she had so often spoken with innocent admiration!

Mildred wished her happiness with all her heart. She would be infinitely happier out of her father's clutches!

But Mrs. Griffith was speaking.

"Welby! Isn't that the name of the man who is contesting Middleborough? I have resisted reading about that election, as you know; but I *must* hear about it now. The result will be in Tuesday's paper: look for it, Mrs. Wood."

Mildred after some search, found the desired item of intelligence.

"There are a number of long speeches," she said, with a slight unsteadiness of voice.

"Pass them over," cried Mrs. Griffith. "Give me the state of the 'poll.'"

"'Welby, five hundred and seventy-eight. Wandesford, five hundred and sixty-three,'" read Mildred, with restored self-control.

"Ah! the gentleman, of course, is beaten!" cried Mrs. Griffith bitterly. "What ungrateful fools the people are! The gentry have been their best and truest friends. These new men—these sweepers of shops and crossings—whose generosity and conscience, if they started with any, have been seared and obliterated by the desperate struggle to accumulate and to rise—are hard and merciless to those on whose backs they mount to dignity—no, not to dignity—to power! They prate about the wrongs of the working classes! I wonder who would be the first to help them—the self-made man who tramples on them, or the gentleman who has always looked upon them as helpless creatures, to be borne with and assisted?"

"Justice is always better than generosity," said Mildred, half to herself.

"What! are *you* a Radical? That is too absurd! But I attribute this miserable defeat of our side to Godfrey's unpardonable indolence. This Wandesford is a gentleman, but unknown at Middleborough. There, Egerton is a familiar name; the estate which ought to have been Godfrey's lies at its gates. Had Godfrey done his duty, he would have carried the day. Who is this Welby? Some revolting Dissenter—some creature who has amassed his money by extracting the last farthing's worth of labour from the helpless beings who slave for him, whose burdens he would not put forth the tip of his finger to lighten;

and they hoist their taskmaster into still higher authority! May he scourge them with scorpions! We shall soon be reduced to the condition of America—the tyranny of the Majority. Do you think *that* preferable to the system we have hitherto adopted? Have you seen that society is the better for such a state of things?"

"Indeed I have not," said Mildred, perceiving she was expected to speak, and also that Mrs. Griffith was impressed with the idea that she had resided in America.

This allusion to the false colours under which she was sailing, coupled with the appearance of Welby's name, shook her nerves; yet she thought, with something of satisfaction, that Welby must have recovered her loss—that she had not inflicted any hopeless ill upon him. Probably no pang of remorse had troubled his digestion. He would never think himself to blame. He had evidently resumed the even tenor of his existence on which she had left no trace.

But Mrs. Griffith, who had been evidently thinking angrily, now roused herself.

"This last mortification has cut deep into my heart—or whatever that word expresses," she said. "I must try and forget. Where did Godfrey say he was going when he wrote last?"

"To Pau, with Mr. and Miss Ferrers."

"Hum! I don't quite understand that. Well, I shall keep no room for him in my town house. He rarely stays under my roof, so you shall have the small bedroom on the same floor with mine."

"Do you mean that you expect me to reside in your house when you return to Eccleston Square?"

"Yes, of course. Why should you not?"

"I did not intend to do so; and if you will allow me, I should prefer our original arrangement."

"Well, I do not. You are of much more use to me in the house. I have grown accustomed to you. I really must insist on your living under my roof."

Mildred hesitated, not in her decision, but how to express it. "I shall not give you a hundred a year," resumed her imperious employer, "if you insist on spending half your time in your aunt's shop. What is your objection to live in my house?"

"I have no objection to live in your house, Mrs. Griffith; and I am very grateful for the kindness you have shown me while under your roof; but——"

"But," interrupted Mrs. Griffith, "why do you wish for any change? Be sensible, and do not throw away fifty pounds a year."

"If I do not agree for *your* asking, the money question will not affect me," returned Mildred gently. "I am quite willing to accept my former salary, but I will gladly stay with you any evening you are likely to be alone or to need me especially. In London you will have more society, more visitors——"

"Who will bore me to death!" again interrupted Mrs. Griffith; and she launched into a stream of half-angry remonstrance, persuasions, and offers. Mildred, however, stood firm. She was anxious to draw back from the family intimacy into which she had been drawn; she dreaded frequent encounters with Colonel Griffith, and she longed for the freedom of her own abode—in Mrs. Leavett's house, which was perhaps all of home she would ever know.

With an ill-grace Mrs. Griffith at length yielded, being quite shrewd enough to perceive that she had really more to gain from Mildred than she could give in return, and that a threat of dismissal had no terrors for her quiet, attentive secretary.

CHAPTER IV.

THE early days of November saw Mrs. Griffith and her secretary safely installed in London.

There was joy indeed in the little Morton Street household over Mildred's return. Mrs. Leavett's broad honest face beamed such a warm welcome that Mildred's heart glowed with a mingled sense of gratitude and safety. Dick brought her his latest *chef douvre* in the way of drawing, and even the "gurl"—a rather impassive specimen of early womanhood—dropped sundry curtsies, and grinned spasmodically.

Mrs. Leavett declared that her dear young lady looked pounds and pounds better, and younger—yes, younger by years than when she went away. She shook her head slightly when she heard of the promise Mildred had given her employer to spend the evening with her whenever her company was needed.

"She'll just be keeping you every day," said Mrs. Leavett.

"No, no, auntie. I will not give in to that."

"Well, I hope she is as liberal with her money as you are with your time."

"I scarcely expect it, auntie, when I will not agree to her wishes. But I have saved all my salary while at Pennogwen. Postage was my only expense. Now tell me all about yourself."

"There's nothing to tell. Things have gone on

much as usual—indeed better. I often think you have brought me luck, Miss Milly, for the business has thriven wonderful since you came under my roof."

"Ah! no. *I* could never bring anyone luck!" said Mildred sadly. "Your own energy and integrity have brought you success."

"Anyhow I've been doing well, thank God! I have a parcel for you, Mrs. Wood, ma'am."

"For me!" cried Mildred, in frank surprise. "How! Where did it come from?"

"There it is," said Mrs. Leavett, fetching a square packet from a cupboard. "It was left by a boy, directed to me; and when I took off the outside wrapper there was that inside."

"*That*" was another address. "To Mrs. Wood, care of Mrs. Leavett."

Mildred hastily opened the parcel: it contained books, and a note from Brian Leigh.

"How very good of him!" she exclaimed, as she read the contents.

"I send you a word of welcome, and a curious little 'History of St. Hubert's,' which may interest you; also two or three books of which we have spoken. I think you have not seen them—they may draw your thoughts from dwelling too much on the more sombre side of things. Any further news of your brother?"

"Is he not kind and good!" she repeated, handing the note to Mrs. Leavett, who perused it with a somewhat grim expression and a mouth very tightly shut, while Mildred examined the books. "This is full of queer old pictures of St. Hubert's," she continued. "It

is dated 1760; it seems most interesting. Do look at it, Koo!"

This kindly token of remembrance thus meeting her on the first page of a new chapter in her secret history was inexpressibly cheering to Mildred. She longed for an opportunity to thank Leigh for his kind thought, and fearing it might not soon offer, wrote a few vivid words of acknowledgment, which Mrs. Leavett herself took to the nearest postpillar.

The first days of Mrs. Griffith's return to her town house were a good deal distracted by the in-comings and out-goings of Miss Ferrers, who was preparing for a winter in the south of France, and hesitating between Pau and Biarritz. Colonel Griffith also darkened the scene by his august presence, which was exceedingly gloomy, not to say generally wrathful. He took no notice of Mildred, and seemed to have dismissed her from his thoughts, or rather his mind was too full of some less agreeable subject. He asked for and obtained more than one private interview with his mother—after which she was sterner and more irritable than Mildred had known her to be since the beginning of their acquaintance. But respecting the matters in dispute between her and her son, she was profoundly silent. Her solicitor paid her more than one visit—also in private; all these indications pointed to fresh difficulties gathering round her favourite son.

Gwendoline Ferrers was as flighty and friendly as ever, and remarked more than once Frank Griffith's altered appearance and manner.

"He is in some tremendous trouble, Mrs. Wood," she said, "you may be quite sure. Poor Cousin Griffith, she always has worries—a couple of daughters would

have been better than sons. I wish Brian Leigh were back again."

"Is Mr. Leigh away?" asked Mildred, who had been secretly disturbed and disappointed at his prolonged absence, which Mrs. Griffith was too preoccupied to notice, though day after day her secretary had watched for him eagerly, and sought for some explanation without asking for it in so many words.

"Oh yes! Frank says he went off to Brussels at a tangent, and no one knows when he will return. These newspaper men are always on the go."

Mildred did not reply. A sudden revelation struck her heart like a two-edged dagger—a revelation of the insecurity of such a friendship as had sprung up between herself and a mere stranger. She must not lean upon him, or trust to his supporting presence. She had no claim on his gratuitous kindness; no tie wherewith to hold him; his time, his presence belonged to his profession. She must look to herself alone. She had been weak—foolishly imaginative. Perhaps she might never see him again! or if she did, but for a moment in passing. She was startled by the keen pang this idea gave her.

"So you see, your perception is not faultless," Miss Ferrers was saying when Mildred roused herself to listen. "Godfrey is going with us to Pau—that does not look like indifference, does it?"

"Does he not like Pau for itself? and did I not hear that his friend Lord Allerton was to be master of the hounds there this winter?"

"Really, Mrs. Wood, you are very rude! Why should you doubt my power of observation. I assure you, Co-

lonel Griffith was quite *aux petits soins* all the time we were at Lord Fitzhugh's.

"Where?" asked Mildred, struck by the name.

"Oh! at Lord Fitzhugh's, or rather Lady Fitzhugh's place in Yorkshire. You know he married a very rich widow, who is really nice too—some people have such luck! Well, there were two beauties there—Mrs. Longmore and Lady Frederica Brabazon; they both made a dead set at him, but he took refuge with me! poor little me! What do you think of that! Oh, I did enjoy it! You know, I fancy there was a little laziness at the bottom of his virtuous conduct! Never mind! from small beginnings noble structures rise—and I shall lead Colonel Godfrey captive yet."

Mildred shook her head.

"Don't do that, Mrs. Wood! What in the world has turned you against Colonel Griffith? You are quite bitter! Oh, heavens! did he ever make love to you and then leave off? because that is maddening! No, I don't think you are Godfrey's style at all. Dear Mrs. Wood, do tell me the truth! Did he make up to you?"

"On the contrary," returned Mildred, laughing, "he always looked down upon me!"

"Did he?—did he really? I don't think he could. You know his manners are not enchanting when he is put out. And he generally was put out at Pennogwen. Still, men have such queer whims. He might have taken a fancy to you."

"Ah, Miss Ferrers," cried Mildred, with a slight proud gesture of disgust, "if you knew all I have suffered, you would understand that such ideas are a cruel insult to me."

"Oh dear, I wish you would tell me all about it! I dare say you fancy I have no heart, no feeling; but I have, only I can't talk solemnly; and I like you ever so much. If I were going to stay, I should never rest till I made you tell me everything; but we start to-morrow. Godfrey is in Paris waiting for us, and Lord Allerton has gone on. I wonder what will happen before we meet again!"

"So do I," returned Mildred, with a sinking heart.

"You don't stay here altogether now," resumed Miss Ferrers, "so I shall not see you again. Good-bye. Take care of yourself. You know, if I find you a duchess on my return, I shall not be surprised."

Mildred smiled, and then they parted.

* * * * *

Mrs. Griffith was listening with grim satisfaction to a paragraph in the *Times* which her secretary was reading aloud to her a few mornings after the departure of Mr. and Miss Ferrers and suite for the Continent had been duly announced in the *Morning Post*. The paragraph stated that a petition was in preparation against the return of Mr. M. Welby for Middleborough, when "Mr. Griffith" was announced.

"Ha! Frank, this is an early visit," said his mother.

Mildred, glancing at his white set face, saw that the moment for his long-deferred explanation had arrived, and rose from her seat, before Frank's request, "May I speak to you in private, my dear mother?" and Mrs. Griffith's quick command, "Leave us, Mrs. Wood," set her free to go.

The library, as it was called, was usually Mildred's place of refuge when Mrs. Griffith wished to see anyone alone, and here she retired on the present occa-

sion. On opening the door her heart gave a sudden bound of surprise and pleasure, for standing in one of the windows, a newspaper in his hand, stood Leigh.

"I am so glad to see you!" exclaimed Mildred. "I was afraid you had gone quite away."

Leigh did not speak immediately. As he took the hand she held out, his eyes eagerly questioned hers, his fingers closed warmly over her hand for one irresistible second.

"Quite away!" he repeated. "No, you did not believe that!" How pleasant his voice sounded, so clear and firmly distinct, so expressive of decision and sense. "I was obliged to start very unexpectedly for Brussels to oblige my chief; and could not succeed for a few days in finding the right man to supply my place. There is an Industrial Exhibition going on there, about which they want letters and reports. Then I got leave to retire on the plea of urgent private affairs—very private!" added Leigh, with one of the quick kindly smiles which occasionally lent sunshine to his face.

"Could he have given up this mission on my account?" thought Mildred; but the notion was absurd, and she banished it at once. "I am glad," she repeated, dreamily looking on the ground, "for things have been dreary and disturbed since we left Pennogwen. Mrs. Griffith has, I am sure, been troubled about her eldest son; and now——"

"Frank is under fire," said Leigh, drawing a chair for her.

"He is; but I fled before a word was spoken. I do wish he had never seen this young lady!"

"So do I. It's hard lines for her: it's hard lines

all round. I fear if Frank is disappointed, he will never be good for much. And you yourself, Mrs. Wood! How do you like the change back to town?"

"I am well, and in some ways I am glad to return. It is, as you can imagine, a great pleasure to be with my dear old friend, Mrs. Leavett; but I have lost the sense of freedom I had at Pennogwen. I dread going out!"

"There is little to fear in this quarter. And the veil you wear is a capital disguise."

"How do you know?" asked Mildred, surprised.

"I saw you returning home yesterday, but resisted the temptation to join you. It would not have been wise."

He watched her closely while she answered with composure:

"Certainly not! I must carefully avoid any appearance of being different from what I seem."

She paused; he did not speak, and she resumed:

"It was so good of you to send me those books! I was deeply interested in the history of St. Hubert's and the Forest; it is infinitely sweet, yet sad, to read about it. Do you know the Forest at all?"

"I have ridden through it once or twice during the only visit I ever paid to Dacre Court—at the time I met you. It seems a strange freak of Destiny that sent me there to meet you, and then swept us together again."

"It does indeed!"

"You have had no further news from your brother?"

Mildred shook her head sadly, and walking to the fireplace, laid her hand on the dark velvet-coloured mantel-board, resting her cheek against it, and gazing

into the fire, as though trying to read the future in the glowing coals. The dull light of a November day fell upon the bright glossy brown of her hair, the reflection of the leaping flames touched her lips and cheek, and played on the straight folds of her black dress.

Leigh stood gazing at her, waiting her next words, battling with wishes and anticipations which would well up like a torrent suddenly let loose; but she still kept silence.

"I may weary you by my reiteration of the same counsel," he said, coming a step or two nearer; "but I can lose no opportunity of urging you to confide in your brother at all risks. His presence would be a safeguard against much. He would be your natural protector. It is impossible you can go on leading this life of concealment and isolation."

"Can you assure me that Arthur will be able to save me from Mr. Welby—that he will try?"

"I am certain he will take your view of the matter—at least, so far as one mind can answer for another; and I am almost sure you can be saved from Welby."

"Almost! not altogether, Mr. Leigh?" said Mildred, turning to him with a smile. "Believe me, I long indescribably for the comfort of communication with my brother; but until I have some further tidings of him, or from him, I have not the courage to do anything."

"Shall I try and make acquaintance with Welby, and ascertain what he is about?" asked Leigh eagerly.

"I do not see that it would be any use," returned Mildred despondingly. "Believe me," she continued, "I wish to follow your advice, but for the horrible dread which overwhelms me. I shall be stronger by-

and-by. Remember it is little more than a year since I died and came to life again!"

"You are an extraordinary woman!"

There was a moment's silence; and Leigh resumed:

"I can do but little for you; at least let me know when you want any more books, or anything I can procure for you. You know I must not—dare not—go to see you, save on some rare occasion. I am obliged to trust to the meagreness of letter-writing."

"Oh, I shall write to you only too readily!" cried Mildred, with the frankness which was her shield and spear; "and I should like you very much to come and see me—but that must not be. I will write sometimes, but I shall take care not to trouble you too often."

"You need not fear," said Leigh, in a low but significant tone; "my chief desire is to be of use to you until"—he paused, and added, as if with an effort, "until I see you safe with your brother."

"And I am grateful—you do not know how grateful!" cried Mildred, holding out her hand with graceful, innocent abandonment to the feeling of the moment. "You have brought the first gleam of hope that has come across the thick darkness of my life!"

Leigh took the hand she offered and held it gently for a moment, bending his head so that she did not see his face, and then loyally released it.

"It must be an awful life——" he was beginning, when Frank burst into the room in an abrupt manner, very different from his usual style.

"That's over!" he said, walking to the fireplace, where he stopped suddenly.

His face was pale, his eyes angry.

"Of course your interview was useless!" cried Leigh.

"Worse than useless! I was overwhelmed with taunts and reproaches, till I lost my self-control, and was decidedly imprudent; at any rate, I am forbidden the house until I renounce my folly. More than that —my mother warns me that the day I marry, she will stop the allowance she has hitherto made me."

"I feared as much," said Leigh.

"I must bid you good-bye, Mrs. Wood," resumed Frank. "It will be some time before we meet again; but I shall always remember your kind thoughtfulness about those letters. By the way, we never could find a clue to the writer. Well, I did not make much of suppressing them; but I am not the less grateful to you. I hope we shall meet again."

"Good-bye," returned Mildred, who had turned to leave the room as soon as he entered. "I wish I had better help to offer you than mere sympathy. I earnestly hope matters may turn out better than you expect."

They shook hands, and with a slight bow to Leigh, who held the door open, she passed through it and went to Mrs. Griffith.

"Well!" ejaculated Brian Leigh, when Frank had thrown himself into a chair.

"Well!" repeated Frank; "it is exceedingly ill—worse even than I expected! My mother has loaded me with sarcastic rebukes for my idleness and aimless life—all true enough! There is no use, however, in looking back now—I must do the best I can; and my first task is to try and pacify old Burton. I am afraid he will forbid me the house. I have a sort of notion he has a wealthier and worthier son-in-law in his eye; but if my little Dolly keeps true——"

He paused.

"If there really is a wealthier and worthier son-in-law in the background, Frank, would it not be better for all parties to let him take up the running? More just to the young lady, who must wait for you for an indefinite time, and to whom you have little or nothing to offer; more——"

"Brian, my good fellow, you don't know what you are talking about!" interrupted Frank. "Hand over Dolly to any other man! I'll exhaust possibilities first! She is made of truer stuff than to give me up except under some pressure such as I can hardly imagine. Pooh! *you* never were in love—probably never will be in love—or you would not talk in that cold-blooded manner. You have frittered away your affections—no, your fancies—playing with fire; you have never plunged into the flames. I don't know whether to envy or pity you!" cried Frank, starting up. "But there is no use talking to you—or to anyone here. I'll be off to old Burton, and see what I can do with him."

"Do you want me?"

"No—thanks; in such an affair the principals suffice. Shall I find you in your chambers this evening?"

"Yes, I will wait for you; come to dinner, and we'll talk over everything."

"Thanks!—at 7·30, then. Good-bye, my philosopher!"

"Philosopher!" repeated Leigh to himself, looking after Frank as he left the room, with a grim smile—"I have but small right to such an appellation just at present."

* * * * *

Winter settled down gloomily within and without after this scene.

At times Mildred thought Mrs. Griffith missed the cheery visits of her younger son, but she kept a rigid silence, and was more stern than irritable. For some time she was cold and distant with Brian Leigh, but she did not forbid him the house. In truth, he seemed all that was left to her.

To Mildred his visits were the only gleams of brightness in her sombre existence. The moment he came into the room, though his greeting was usually but a silent bow, she felt a sense of revival, as though a current of stronger, warmer life suddenly circulated through her system.

He had contrived to find a moment in which to tell her Frank had been angrily warned that he must attempt no further communication with Miss Burton, who had been sent away from London; but Leigh added he did not think the blockade was very strictly observed, for Frank had somewhat recovered his spirits, and was busy pushing what interest he had, in order to obtain some employment on the strength of which he might again approach the fair Dolly's unfriendly father.

Mildred was often requested to spend the evening with Mrs. Griffith, and otherwise kept close to her side, so that she very rarely had an opportunity of speaking to Leigh, save in the presence of her employer.

It was therefore with a pleasurable sense of excitement she watched Leigh one afternoon shortly before Christmas trace a few lines while he was conversing with his kinswoman, and then place them and his pencil before her.

The words were: "I have some news for you. May I call this evening at nine?"

A quick bright flush mounted to Mildred's cheek as she wrote "Yes," underlining the word, and passed back the paper. Leigh looked his thanks, and threw it into the fire, carefully holding it down with the poker till quite consumed.

"Don't stir the fire, Brian! It is too hot already," said Mrs. Griffith impatiently. "Some men cannot keep their hands quiet. By-the-bye, can you dine with me to-day? The Rector and Mrs. Watkin are in town, and dine here, both to-day and to-morrow, and indeed every day they have no other invitation. Everyone makes use of my house."

"I am sorry, Mrs. Griffith, I cannot. I am particularly engaged."

"Hum! I suppose you are engaged to-morrow, too?" drily.

"I am; but I think I can get off if you wish it."

"I do. If you will dine here I will ask General and Mrs. Clavering. It is dull for the Rector, and a great bore for me to have no man at the foot of the table."

And her good considerate loyal friend was coming to see her! They would have a long unbroken talk. The idea filled Mildred's eyes with soft brilliant light, and lent wings to her feet as she sped homewards to tell Mrs. Leavett.

The news must be about Arthur. Had he not told her some time back that he had written to Trevor on purpose to gain intelligence? Nor was the news bad.

She gathered that from his eyes. How kind and honest they looked as he watched her write her assent to his request, and they looked hopeful too.

"Auntie dear, he is coming this evening with some news of Arthur. Mr. Leigh, I mean. He asked if he might, and of course I said yes."

"Of course. I think he is a real gentleman. And where did he get news of Mr. Arthur?"

"Oh, I don't know yet. And I am not quite sure it is about Arthur, though it must be. He knows I do not care about any other news."

"No, to be sure. God send it's good news. What beautiful flowers! Where did you get them, my dear?"

"Oh, they are from Pennogwen. A boy had just come, so I begged a few from the butler. He is always very nice. And I want the drawing-room to look pretty."

When Mildred had arranged the flowers, and given a few final touches which bestowed a pleasant homelike aspect to the comfortable room, she stood still and thought, for a minute or two before the glass. She was debating in her own mind, or rather resisting the temptation, to put on the thin dinner-dress she used to wear in the evening at Pennogwen, and fighting with the wish to do her hair a little differently. It was but for a minute or two, then, blushing with shame at what she considered her own reprehensible levity, she told herself that she had nothing to do with such things; the plainest, simplest penitential garb was best suited to one who ought to be, but was not, a penitent. Mr. Leigh, though too compassionate to dwell on the subject, well knew she must make up

her mind to bear the results of having broken a sacred social law—a law of the world, to which, according to all who knew him, he was entirely devoted. No, she would receive him as she was, her hair drawn as lightly back as its rebellious richness would permit, and in her plain straight everyday dress. Why need she care? A disinterested kindly friend such as Mr. Leigh would little heed how she looked.

Punctually at the hour appointed Leigh was ushered in. Mildred did not dream of suppressing or concealing the pleasure she felt in the prospect of a long uninterrupted talk with him.

"Thank you so much for coming," she said, advancing with outstretched hand. "And your news is not bad?"

"No, decidly good." He stopped abruptly, and looked round the pretty bright room. It was strangely delightful to be there alone with her, safe from interruption for a good hour at least. What beauty the animation of expectancy gave to her speaking face! How charming her complete freedom from self-consciousness! "I am examining your prison-house," he said with a smile, as he drew a chair near the sofa on which she took her seat. "I have often tried to imagine how you contrived to live in an ordinary room over a shop. But you have made it your own. It bears your superscription. Will you forgive me for expressing my appreciation of the extraordinary courage and constancy with which you endure your most trying position?"

"I have no right to complain, Mr. Leigh. What I have done I did with my eyes open. I must bear the

result. Now, I am burning to hear what you have to tell."

"Well, first, I have had Trevor's answer to my letter, I have brought it with me," taking a note-book from his pocket and selecting a letter, which he handed to her. "You will see he speaks of yourself—a curious experience for you to read it after your resurrection!"

"Yes—most strange!" cried Mildred, trembling as she unfolded Trevor's missive.

After expressing his pleasure at hearing from Leigh, explaining the delay in replying, caused by his absence, and touching on some personal matters, Trevor continued:

"As to Carr, I see a good deal of him. He seems to be doing very well indeed. He has sobered down wonderfully, yet on the whole is as pleasant a fellow as ever; perhaps I am soberer myself. He seems quite a confidential *employé* at Grant, Oakley, and Gribble's (one of the biggest houses here). He lives with Gribble, who treats him like a son, and with whom I often dine. Gribble is a first-rate little chap; but I don't think he has ever been quite the same since poor Mrs. Welby destroyed herself. He often talks of her awful death when we are alone. I never can speak of it without a horrible pang, nor can I ever cease to feel a thrill of pain when I think of the terrible moment when she vanished. She was a charming woman—so sweet, so unconscious of herself! What a life her brute of a husband led her! If one could only have sent him into the crevasse and set her free!

You remember, don't you, that night at our ball? Well, I don't think she ever had a happy hour after!

"Carr and I sometimes talk of his sister. He was very fond of her; he gets furious when he thinks of her martyrdom; and she had not a soul to help her! The fact of her having taken such a large sum of money (five hundred, I believe) with her is very puzzling, and opposed to the theory of premeditated suicide. Gribble has questioned me a dozen times as to the old guide—his reputation at Chamouni, etc. —as if trying to solve the riddle; but all the conjectures and theories we can form won't bring back the dear dead.

"Carr has just started for Shanghai, to look after some business for Gribble, who seems quite proud that his *protégé* has so far grown in grace and mercantile knowledge that he may be trusted with such a mission. I believe he will return about the end of December, when I shall take care to give him your message.

"It is probable the regiment may be sent," etc., etc.

Here the sheet ended. Mildred laid it on her lap, her clasped hands resting on it, and gazed far away with dreamy eyes.

Leigh, who had watched her while she read, still kept silence.

"It is indeed strange—passing strange," said Mildred at length, speaking softly, as if to herself, "that I should be still in life to read this—this account of my dead self. How it makes me long—oh, long till my heart aches!—to be with Arthur and dear good

Mr. Gribble—to hear their voices, to feel the touch of their hands!"

She pressed one of her own over her heart as she spoke, and holding out the letter for Leigh to take, rose, and walked to and fro, then pausing beside the table, where the lamp-light fell on her pale cheek and quivering lips,

"That letter," she said, "makes me feel so guilty—guilty of grieving those I love! Yet I could not live on as I was—oh! no, no, no! I could not; and for me there was no deliverance save through the gate of death!"

She pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and regaining her composure, returned to her seat.

"At least, this shows you," said Leigh, "how safely you may appeal to your brother—how rejoiced he would be to know you were in life—to come to your assistance."

"How can we be sure it would be so?" replied Mildred thoughtfully. "Arthur mourns the dead; but would not my return to life be awkward, trying, scandalous? Should I not still have to lead a concealed existence? and that would be a trial for Arthur."

Some impulse Leigh could not account for impelled him to reply:

"It might be so; still, I feel bound to urge your communicating with your brother."

"Ah!" cried Mildred quickly, "you begin to see difficulties as I do!"

"They are not strong enough to deter you," he said, in an odd, constrained voice.

"But you admitted, that day we spoke together at Pennogwen, that if he chose, Mr. Welby could compel

me to go back to him. You must not hide my danger from me. Arthur might not be able to protect me, and"—she shuddered, and added in a lowered voice —"such a possibility would drive me to even a more desperate deed than I have done!"

"By heaven!" cried Leigh, starting up restlessly, "the idea makes one understand how, in the great Mutiny, men destroyed the women they loved best, rather than let them fall into the hands of mutineers."

"Would you kill me, then, to save me from so horrible a fate?" asked Mildred, struck and fascinated by the passion and tenderness in his eyes.

"I could—I would!" he returned, the harsh depth of his tone showing how strongly he was moved.

"And I should thank you!" cried Mildred, with answering passion. "Now I know you understand and sympathize with me; now I see I can trust your judgment."

"But," resumed Leigh, after a pause, mastering the sudden fire that had stirred him, and speaking in his usual voice, "in our highly civilized condition these tragic remedies are unnecessary. Let us see how things would go if you appealed to your brother."

He returned to his seat, and resting his elbow on the table, shaded his face with his hand.

"He would return and explain matters to Welby, who, to avoid exposure and the opening-up of an already forgotten story, would probably agree to a separation, though I don't fancy you could get much in the shape of alimony from him. Then you could live with your brother: the horrible ban of concealment and secrecy would be lifted off you, and your

lot would not be brilliant, but it might be peaceful—safe——"

He stopped abruptly.

"It would be far better than anything I have ever dared to hope! But give me the opposite side of the picture. Suppose Mr. Welby braved exposure and insisted on his rights?"

"You would have a long, hard fight, and piles of unpleasantness; still I do not think in the end he could force you to go back to him."

"And how could Arthur and I carry on such a war without funds? You must remember we are penniless! Ought I to blight my brother's career, now that he has a chance?"

"This Mr. Gribble would help you?"

"It is quite possible Mr. Gribble might consider it my duty to return to my husband."

"I do not imagine he would."

There was a short silence, then Mildred covered her face with her hands for an instant, and exclaimed:

"If I had only known the difference between the feeling Mr. Welby showed for me and true affection, I should have struggled, starved, and been saved."

"That is what no girl, and few women, can ever know," said Leigh.

"And," continued Mildred, "what a terrible future is before me. It is not so bad now, while the sense of a blessed escape is still with me; but when in the long years to come that is forgotten,—and impressions wear out, how shall I live on alone—always alone! But I will not yield to this cowardice. I ought to blush for my weakness in deploring the result of my own deliberate choice. I will hope that there is un-

expected good behind the dark curtain which my own act has drawn before me."

"I sometimes question if it be really wise to forego certain joys—hours of deepest pleasure—for the sake of our social laws," said Leigh. "Life is so short—happiness so rare."

"I do not think that breaking the laws, written or unwritten, under which we live will help our happiness," said Mildred, as if to herself. Leigh looked at her earnestly, but she did not notice him; her thoughts were far away.

"Do not put away that letter, Mr. Leigh," she said presently, as he drew out his note-book again; "I should like to show it to Koo—to Mrs. Leavett. May I keep it?"

"Yes, certainly."

"It is a pleasure, a sad pleasure, to read it over," and she began to look at it again. This time a faint smile parted her lips when she came to Trevor's eulogium on herself, and she exclaimed, "Ah! the dead are generally idealized!"

"It must be a satisfaction to you to know that your brother is succeeding."

"Yes, it relieves me from great anxiety. Mr. Leigh, I will be guided by you. You deserve that I should listen to your counsel. As soon as I can learn my brother's address I will write to him and tell him all, but I will entreat him to let me still hide myself, and then I will wait what time may bring."

"And for my part, I will try and secure the earliest intelligence of his return. This is all you can decide on at present, Mrs. Wood. If Carr comes back at the

time Trevor mentions he will be in Calcutta within a week. I will write at once."

"You are very, very good," said Mildred softly. Leigh smiled, and his eyes said that he would do more than that for her. "I have still a morsel of news for you," he returned, "more curious than important. I find that Frank is acquainted with Mr. Welby. It seems he has met him at the Burtons'. Burton *père* appears to transact business with him. I did not venture to ask many questions, but as I had to write a leader on the Middleborough election, that was an excuse. I rather fear Welby will be unseated."

"How! Do you think he is a desirable M.P!"

"Every vote lost to the Liberals is a consideration, whatever the voter may be."

"That is quite a masculine view of the subject," returned Mildred, smiling; "and what does Mr. Griffith think of my husband?"

"Don't call him your husband, for God's sake!" cried Leigh, with a gesture of disgust. "He is not! You have broken with him for ever!"

Mildred looked up in some surprise; and he went on quickly:

"Frank rather liked him—thought him a heavy, good-natured, worthy sort of a citizen."

"*Exactly!*" said Mildred, and paused; then added: "Tell me about Mr. Griffith."

"There is not much to tell. Frank has some hopes of an appointment from a relation of his; but he is very much in the dolefuls. Old Burton has sent off his daughter somewhere. Frank is, I think, in cor-

respondence with her, but *sub rosâ*, and he is very reticent. You would be amused to see his efforts at economy. I fancy the lovers will win after all."

"How strange that Mr. Burton and Mr. Welby should be acquainted!"

"Not at all!" returned Leigh. "They both gamble on the Stock Exchange. Now, Mrs. Wood, I must leave you. Time will not stand still for the most ardent wishes, and your good friend Mrs. Leavett will want to shut up her house."

"It is—oh! it is almost half-past ten! Yes—you must go! I am so sorry! I feel like my own real self while I am talking to you."

"May I not come again?" asked Leigh eagerly.

"I fear not—I must be so careful! I don't say you must never come—only not again for some months."

"It is a cruel deprivation!" cried Leigh unguardedly.

"It is to me, too; but consider the apparent difference of our social position!—the visits of a man like you——"

She stopped abruptly—the construction which might be put upon their intercourse struck her, and a vivid flush flamed over cheek and throat.

"I will obey you implicitly in all things," said Leigh gravely; "only promise to write to keep me informed of all matters concerning yourself! I shall be able sometimes to exchange a word with you at Mrs. Griffith's. Good-night, Mrs. Wood."

"Your news—your friendly haste to inform me—has made it good night to me!" returned Mildred, giving him her hand; and not to save his life could Leigh resist holding it closer and longer than was

necessary, while he gazed into the dark, sad eyes upraised to his.

"It is as well she has forbidden me to call upon her," thought Leigh, as, feeling the need of exercise, he walked rapidly through the dark, cold, foggy streets towards the Temple. "Such interviews would soon become too much for my philosophy, and I must not and will not allow myself to lose my head! I must be her true friend, and nothing more. Why should I not take the matter into my own hands, if she hesitates, and write to her brother myself? She wants him sorely, and I need him almost as much; but would she forgive me for acting without her knowledge or consent? And what manner of man *is* the brother? would he let that infernal brute get hold of her again? Rather than *that*, I'd blow Welby's brains out, were I to swing for it! *Anything* would be better than that —even a further breach of social law! I am losing my head! These are not the thoughts to keep my judgment cool, my resolution unshaken. And she likes to see me—she was reluctant to let me go! Suppose, in her loneliness, she grows to love the only friend she can speak to—except that old grocer-woman? It won't do to think of that either! How fair, and gentle, and delicately graceful she is! and utterly unconscious of her own charm, her own danger. I *must* think for her. What fire and pluck, too, under her velvety softness! I might go and see Mrs. Griffith to-morrow! No, not to-morrow!—better be prudent—the day after? Yes, certainly the day after! I suspect there are bitter fiery moments gathering for me. Well, let them come! there will be some rapture with them. The very consciousness of intense life such as I

never felt before, is worth paying for! How will it all end?"

So reviewing the past, and anticipating the future, Leigh reached his own abode.

Meantime, Mildred went in search of Mrs. Leavett.

"I think she is upstairs, 'm," said the servant, in reply to her inquiries. "Master Dick has a nasty cold, so she has taken him a hot drink."

But Mildred soon followed, and claimed her attention, while together they pored over Trevor's letter and congratulated each other on Arthur's good fortune.

CHAPTER V.

MILDRED'S first consciousness when she woke the morning after this interview was a new delightful sense of courage, hope, almost happiness. She had always felt that Leigh was a kind true friend, but their long confidential conversation had convinced her that he was absolutely sympathetic, that he was devoted to her service. She was no longer isolated and helpless. She had a safe means of communication with the world beyond her hiding-place, in this shrewd quick-seeing man, whose watchful care seemed to surround her with unexpected safety. He was wise too, well versed in the ways of men, in the conduct of life. She would be guided by him. She would seek her brother, and perhaps the future would prove less trouble, less lonely than she anticipated.

Perhaps Mildred ought to have questioned the source of this ardent sympathy, this tender consideration; but both were too welcome, too reviving not to be received without hesitation. Will the weary wayfarer, parched and worn on the dry dusty unknown road, along which he is forced to toil, stop to analyze the water of a fresh sparkling spring unexpectedly discovered, before drinking deep of the precious restorative?

"I have quite made up my mind, dear Koo," she said to that faithful friend who generally came into her room before she went forth to her daily avocations,

"to confide everything to Arthur as soon as I know where to address a letter to him. It would not do to run the risk of its being opened by anyone."

"That's right," returned Mrs. Leavett; "and you look another creature—years younger for having come to a decision. Ah, my dear, it's a long lane that has no turning. I'll see you happy yet. If it would only please the Lord to remove that Welby, it would be the best day ever I saw."

"Oh, Koo, that is worse than anything I ever thought! I only wish to be saved from him. Why should he die to put me at ease?"

"Why shouldn't he? Better men than he is are dying every day. What good does he do to himself or anyone else? He would be better out of the way."

"And how do you think he would fare in another world?" asked Mildred, who felt in sufficiently good spirits to enjoy drawing out Mrs. Leavett.

"Oh, I know nothing about any other world. I am pretty sure of this one, and it's hard enough to manage in it."

"I imagine the most difficult matter is to rise gracefully from one's grave without inconveniencing anyone."

"Ah, you needn't fear that."

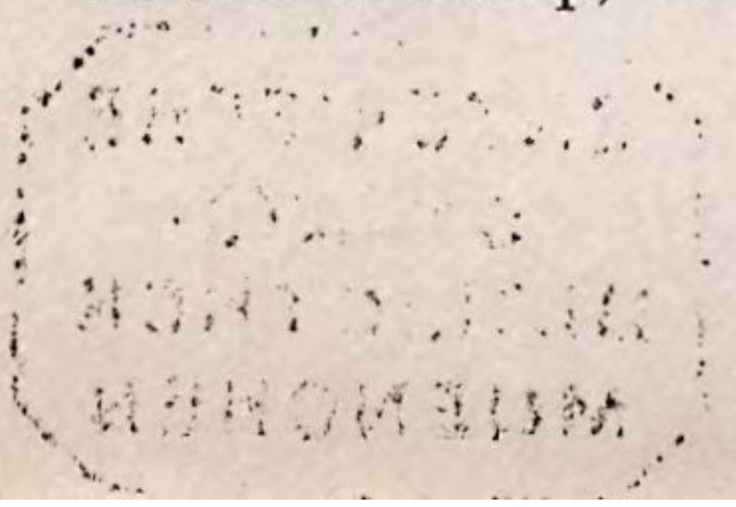
"How is Dick this morning?"

"He is rather bad; he's had a restless night. I'm going to send for the doctor. A stitch in time saves nine. Dick has never been strong."

"No, poor boy. I will read to him when I come in. He likes to be read to."

"You'll have reading enough without that, my dear young lady!"

It was a damp, dreary, drizzling day, not actively



cold, but raw and chill. Mildred, though usually alive to atmospheric influences, was too hopeful to be depressed by the weather. This mood was fortunate, for Mrs. Griffith was irritable, querulous, and exacting. She had a good deal of letter-writing for her secretary to accomplish. The near approach of Christmas demanded the despatch of various bounties customary at that season. And Mrs. Griffith was afflicted with a stingy fit. Nor would she have any of her correspondence read to her until her business epistles were finished.

Mildred fancied that she missed Frank more than she cared to admit, though she never alluded to him or seemed conscious of his absence. But she often fell into long intervals of silence and abstraction, from which she used to rouse herself with a sigh.

In spite of her variations of temper and tyrannical disposition, Mildred had a certain liking and profound pity for the proud, helpless, desolate woman.

"This is from Miss Ferrers," said Mildred, after having waded through a number of letters, complimentary, begging, suggestive, over which Mrs. Griffith grumbled and sneered.

"What has *she* to say? She rarely honours me."

Miss Ferrers wrote in high spirits. Pau was unusually delightful; golf and fox-hunting were in the highest perfection; society charming, and Godfrey unusually amiable. People did say he was playing high. She (Gwendoline) didn't believe it, for he was always *en évidence* and a good deal with Lord Vernon and his daughter, who was considered the beauty *par excellence* that winter; "though why I cannot understand," added Miss Ferrers.

BAYERISCHE STAATS-BIBLIOTHEK MUENCHEN

"I dare say not," observed Mrs. Griffith contemptuously. "If Miss Vernon is at all like her mother, she ought to be a beauty; and if not, the heirship to eighty thousand a year and one of the oldest baronies in England would lend loveliness to a May-pole. But I have no doubt she is a very different style of girl from my flighty young relative."

Here Mrs. Griffith fell into deep thought, and while Mildred kept respectfully silent, she watched the blind lady's expression grow gradually less harsh, less peevish. The letter had evidently suggested some pleasant train of reflection. She soon roused herself, however, to dictate a few replies—short, but not uncivil; and ordering Miss Ferrer's effusion to be put aside for the present, she was again thoughtful for a few minutes, and then exclaimed:

"I wish Brian Leigh would call! I suppose he will not, because he is coming to dinner to-day. I want him to write a letter for me—an especial letter, as you may imagine, Mrs. Wood, or I should employ you. There is no more to be done now. Get me the papers."

"No," thought Mildred, who had been anticipating Leigh's visit as extremely probable. "He will not call to-day, then." And she began her daily task with steady attention, satisfied that to-morrow, or next day, she would meet the kind ally whose presence always brought her strength and comfort.

Mildred was glad Mrs. Griffith had company that evening; otherwise she would probably have been invited to stay, and such invitations were commands. She was anxious to be at home, and alone—to build air-castles, to see visions, to know how poor Dick was

going on, to be of use to him, and to save his mother some of the frequent journeys to the top of the house, which utter distrust of the "gurl's" capabilities necessitated.

On reaching Morton Street, after nightfall, the servant informed her that Mrs. Leavett was upstairs with the doctor, who had called a second time; and the girl added, she feared the poor boy was very ill indeed.

Knowing that he had not strength to resist disease, Mildred waited with some anxiety till the doctor's departure gave her an opportunity of speaking with Mrs. Leavett.

"I am afraid Dick is worse than you thought him, Koo," said Mildred, as Mrs. Leavett came into the sitting-room behind the shop, where she was awaiting her.

"I am afraid he is. The doctor was not quite sure this morning what ailed him; but now he has very little doubt it is scarlatina. He has a nasty throat, and is as red as a lobster! The doctor says it must have been working in him for some days; he *has* seemed heavy and drowsy-like, and it was only the day before yesterday I scolded him hard for lolling about in the big armchair! We must keep up his strength, poor lad!"

"Well, dear old friend!" said Mildred, touched by the troubled tender look on her strong face, "I shall be able to help you in your nursing; for I must let Mrs. Griffith know of his illness to-morrow morning, and she has such a horror of infection that I feel sure she will forbid me the house."

"Ah, I should not like to see you catch the fever from him. You must run no risks, Mrs. Wood, nor wear yourself out either."

"There is no danger for anyone so devoid of fear as I am, and I hope you know what pleasure it would be to me if I could be of any use to you! I will see the doctor to-morrow, and constitute myself nurse-in-chief. I think Dick will rather like me near him."

"Ay, that he would! but——"

Mrs. Leavett proceeded to represent the dangers and fatigue to which Mildred would expose herself. She, however, produced no effect upon her hearer, and after some argument the mother yielded to Mildred's determination.

Having written her note to Mrs. Griffith, describing Dick's malady, and asking if she should resume her duties or stay away, she resolved not to send it till the following morning, as she feared it might disturb her irritable employer, and spoil her night's rest.

This finished, and having taken a hasty supper, Mildred repaired to the sick-room, which became her chief place of abode for several weeks.

* * * * *

The dinner that night, at Mrs. Griffith's, was more lively than Leigh expected. The Rector, generally an undemonstrative and rather silent man, had been warmed into unusual animation by a lecture at the Royal Institution, and a concert of sacred music. Moreover, he had been so daringly unorthodox as to go and hear a sermon from Mr. Spurgeon; and on these topics he had much to say. Leigh made, at his kinswoman's request, a most attentive and agreeable host; and the evening was shorter and much more amusing than she anticipated. Perhaps she was herself in a

less irritable and contradictory mood than she had been for some time.

"I never knew the Rector so talkative on subjects unconnected with his parish," said Mrs. Griffith to Leigh, when her other guests had departed.

"Yes! There is more in him than one imagines. The stagnation of life in a remote rectory is apt to bind men with 'the cold chain of silence,'" returned Leigh, smiling.

"Ah! you think you have done well to avoid such a destiny. I am not so sure. Tell me, Brian, are you very busy to-morrow? Can you spare me an hour in the morning or after luncheon? I want you to write a letter for me to Godfrey—a letter I don't want even my prudent and, I believe, very safe secretary to write."

"Yes, Mrs. Griffith; I will come to luncheon with you to-morrow, and take Mrs. Wood's place after."

"Thank you, Brian. There are some family topics which strangers ought not to be permitted to handle. But I have great confidence in Mrs. Wood's discretion. I often wonder what her history can be. She has now been my constant companion for nearly a year, and I have never observed the smallest indication that she belonged to the same class as the person she calls her aunt. She is thoroughly a gentlewoman, but she is wonderfully careful and reticent. There appears to be a legend that she came last from America, and I have never been able to get her on the subject—never succeeded in drawing forth the smallest allusion to her past."

"Why do you attempt it, Mrs. Griffith? If she suits

you, and does the work you require satisfactorily, that is enough. If there is a slight mystery about her, it doesn't affect her."

"Of course not; but I cannot help a strong, natural degree of curiosity. At times there is such sadness in her voice. Latterly she has been brighter; indeed, this morning she was quite cheerful. Is she not a graceful, attractive woman, Brian?"

"Were she in society she would be considered so, I think; but draped in straight, unornamental mourning-garments, she might be a sister of mercy—one can hardly tell what she is."

"She is really a great comfort to me, and I hope she will stay."

"I hope so. Good-night, Mrs. Griffith!"

"Good-night! and be sure to come to-morrow. One-thirty is my luncheon-time."

But the morrow brought a great change in the face of affairs.

When Leigh reached Mrs. Griffith's house at the appointed time, instead of being shown at once into the dining-room and served alone, while the blind lady lunched in her own sitting-room, as was usual, the butler said, in solemn and mysterious tones:

"Mrs. Griffith will be glad to speak to you at once, sir."

Leigh found her being waited on by her maid, to whom she exclaimed as he entered, "There—take it all away; I cannot eat."

"Ah! Brian, I have had a great misfortune—one that might have been prevented, too, if my wishes had been obeyed!"

Then, as the door closed on Davis and the tray,

she groped on the table beside her till she found a note which lay there.

"Nothing serious, I hope?" said Leigh, struck by her tone. "Has Frank——"

"Oh, nothing about Frank. But here is a note from Mrs. Wood, telling me that the odious son of that horrid grocer-woman has scarlet fever, or typhus fever, or smallpox, or something dreadful, and saying she did not like to come to the house without letting me know. Come to the house, indeed! I am not more afraid of infection than my neighbours; but I will *not* have disease introduced into my establishment! Healthy, strong people are much more liable than others to take fever and these terrible disorders. She will probably take it herself. There, read the note!"

Leigh took and read it eagerly.

"I am not sure," continued Mrs. Griffith, "that it was safe to touch the paper; but it is done now."

"I do not think you need distress yourself about that," said Leigh, still looking at Mildred's note; "Mrs. Wood wrote last night, before she went upstairs to see the patient, she says. Besides, it is scarlatina, the mildest form of scarlet fever, which has attacked the boy—a mere childish disorder!"

"Nonsense! They use the most inoffensive word, of course; they don't want to injure their custom by allowing people to know that a horrible fever is infecting their house. I have ordered my servants on no account to go into the shop. If Mrs. Wood had only been reasonable, and properly aware of her duty to *me*, she would have continued to reside in my house, as she did at Pennogwen; then she would have escaped a great inconvenience. I should like to know what *I*

am to do—at this season, too, when there is no getting out, and so few people in town! and really, Davis is more stupid than ever! I must get some temporary amanuensis. Perhaps Mrs. Watkin knows of some one? It may be months before Mrs. Wood can return to me; and no one can tell what may happen in a few months. It is really too bad!"

"Would you like me to call and make any inquiries——" began Leigh.

"Call!" interrupted Mrs. Griffith, with a scream. "Do you want to cut yourself off from me too? No! you shall write a note for me, and post it—*post*, mind! —to Mrs. Wood, begging her to send a message—a telegram—when the doctor is willing to guarantee that all danger of infection is over; and *then* she must go away for complete change before she returns to me!"

Leigh made no reply, but drew the writing materials, which were always at hand, to him, and waited Mrs. Griffith's next words.

"Are you ready?" she said; and proceeded to dictate an exceedingly sharp letter to Mildred, pointing out the inconveniences which had arisen from her refusal of Mrs. Griffith's invitation to come and reside in the house. This accomplished, and instantly despatched to the post, the blind lady, after a pause, said:

"You must come and help me as often as you can, Brian, during this horrid deprivation. Mrs. Watkin will be leaving to-morrow; but she has gone to some office or institution to endeavour to find a suitable person to read and write for me; but I cannot employ a stranger to write about family matters. Now for Godfrey's letter."

This was of special importance, but has nothing to do with our story.

When at last Leigh had done all his kinswoman required, he walked slowly towards the Strand, thinking very gravely of Mrs. Griffith's doubts and fears—of their exaggeration or possible correctness. What, indeed, would be the result if this boy's malady should prove to be that dangerous and most contagious illness, scarlet fever, in its severe type? Was there not some probability that Mrs. Wood, in her depressed mental condition, might herself fall a victim?

It was a hideous thought, and haunted him through the remainder of a busy day.

In Morton Street there was quickly increasing disquietude. Mildred installed herself as nurse, listening diligently to the doctor's orders and directions, making notes of them, lest memory should play her false, and endeavouring by care and attention to make up for want of experience.

The relief to Mrs. Leavett was great. She could attend to her business with a comparatively easy mind, and only permitted herself to see her boy occasionally, taking all possible precautions against carrying infection to her customers. The fever rapidly increased, but the doctor did not consider the symptoms worse than in ordinary cases; the lad's natural delicacy and deficient strength were the chief causes of anxiety. He seemed very pleased to have Mildred near him, and she was sincerely glad to be of service to her good friend, her protectress, as she always considered Mrs. Leavett.

Night had closed in, and the patient had sunk into an uneasy sleep, after some hours of extreme rest-

lessness, when the servant softly opened the door, and made a sign to Mildred. She rose, and went to her.

"Can you come down, ma'am?" asked the girl, giving her a twisted note. It was from Leigh, and contained a line: "Do not refuse to see me, if only for a moment."

"Stay here till I return," said Mildred, and she went down to the drawing-room, where a single candle made darkness visible.

"You have a message for me from Mrs. Griffith?" asked Mildred, as she smilingly rejected Leigh's offered hand.

"On the contrary, her doors would be closed against me if she knew I had come here. I ventured to intrude upon you (and I hope you will excuse me) because I could not rest till I knew the true state of affairs. You fear infection for others, I see, as you would not shake hands with me. Is there not danger for yourself?"

"No—not for anyone who dreads it so little as I do."

"When did the boy show symptoms of illness?"

"He had a bad cold for three or four days, and when the doctor first saw him yesterday, he seemed to recognise what ailed him at once."

"I confess I feel exceedingly anxious about you," said Leigh, in the tone of familiar interest which seemed quite natural from him. "Forgive me if I try to make out how you are looking." He took and held the candle so as to see her face. Mildred, smiling and unembarrassed, submitted to his inspection. "So far you seem well, and up to your work," he said

gravely, as he put the candlestick on the table again, "but it may be a long affair, and you must not go through it alone. Mrs. Leavett must get a professed nurse."

"She talks of doing so; but we will see how poor Dick goes on. Scarlatina is sometimes very slight, and it is time enough as yet to talk of having help."

There was an instant's pause.

"May I come occasionally and hear how you and your patient are going on?" he asked, his eyes dwelling on her wistfully, tenderly.

"Ah, very very seldom, Mr. Leigh," cried Mildred. "Think of the danger of giving a clue to my identity! I will write to you with pleasure, and be glad to hear from you."

"Thanks. I will certainly avail myself of your permission."

"Now I must return to my patient," said Mildred.

"No, no! stay one moment longer!" cried Leigh imploringly. "Tell me, did you think Mrs. Griffith's letter very harsh?"

"It was not tender; but it did not surprise me. I feel in some vague way that I may not be again with Mrs. Griffith. A change, I know not what, seems coming."

"I trust you will soon be in communication with your brother. I hope, yet dread it," said Leigh thoughtfully.

"Yes, there is danger in the experiment, but——" She did not finish her sentence. "Good-night, Mr. Leigh."

"Good-night. Promise me you will take all precautions, that you will take care of yourself? I feel

that for the present I am in your brother's place; and you will allow me the right of remonstrance?"

"Ah, yes; I will indeed," said Mildred, her voice trembling with grateful emotion, while she kept back her tears with difficulty.

She was about to give him her hand, but hesitated.

"I have faced far worse infection than you can possibly bring," he said, catching and holding it gently in both his own. "And you will write to me without fail?—just a word every other day?"

"Without fail," repeated Mildred very softly, as she drew away her hand. "I must not stay another moment." And she disappeared up the dim stair leading to the sick-room.

Leigh stood looking after her for a few minutes; his face was dark and set. If, after all, this cursed disease were to fasten on her, what a cruel obscure tragedy it would be! And how could he endure it? Was it possible that life without this pale, quiet woman, this shadowy survivor of social destruction, would be intolerable? To this question there was no reply.

* * * * *

The wearing routine of attendance on a fever patient need not be detailed. Though Mrs. Leavett persisted in sending for a trained nurse, the patient's preference for Mildred still entailed a good deal of fatigue upon her.

The attack was not of a severe nature. But when beginning to rally from its first onset, Dick had a relapse which almost proved fatal, from the prolonged strain upon his strength. Careful watching pulled him through, however; but the new year was several weeks

old before the patient could be moved into the fresh cheerful drawing-room.

During this trying time Leigh wrote frequently, and called three or four times, always in the evening, to assure himself of Mildred's welfare, to give her tidings of the household in Eccleston Square, and of Frank.

Mrs. Griffith had found another amanuensis, whom she endured rather than approved. She was still angry with Mildred, but very anxious for news of her, though she would not hear of her servants running any risk of infection by going near "that horrid shop." Frank was in better spirits. A distant relative who had lately succeeded to various possessions, amongst them that doubtful good, an Irish estate, had promised him the agency of this property so soon as the present holder of the appointment was otherwise disposed of. In the meantime he had gone to Brussels, where he found Mr. Burton had sent his daughter to live under the strict surveillance of an aunt.

These short visits were wonderfully reviving to Mildred. She grew accustomed to Leigh's care for her. The fact of his being a stranger on whom she had no claim whatever faded from her sight; and associating him with her brother and the past, he seemed by some natural though occult transformation to belong to her.

She was herself (so she thought) cut off, by her extraordinary position, by her cruel circumstances, from the usual destiny of women. She was so deeply conscious of having separated herself by her own act from her fellows that she never dreamt of any man, especially a sensible, unenthusiastic man of the world like Leigh, regarding her as other than an object of compassion, dashed with disapproval. The experience

of her married life, too, made the idea of being again the object of a passion distressing — nay, revolting, while the extreme delicacy and caution with which Leigh guarded against any display of feelings growing every day deeper and stronger, helped to lull their object into security.

It was a joyful evening to Mrs. Leavett and her loving assistant, when—the nurse having been dismissed, and Dick, tired though still bright, was safely settled for the night after his first venture downstairs —they sat down to an extra cup of tea, and a quiet talk over past dangers and future plans.

"I little thought I'd have him with me comparatively well again a fortnight ago," said Mrs. Leavett, taking off her spectacles to wipe her eyes. "And what a help and a comfort you have been to us, Mrs. Wood, my dear! Now we must try and get the poor lad strong again. He has had awful drawbacks."

"The doctor recommends change of air, as soon as Dick can travel, does he not?" returned Mildred.

"He does; and that's just what I'm thinking about. I'll write and see if my friend Mrs. Carver's rooms, at Dover, are empty, as they will likely be at this time; and as you have nothing to do just now, I was going to make so bold as to ask if you would mind going with him. I know it's something of a liberty; but after all you have done——" Mrs. Leavett paused, and began to rub her glasses.

"There is no question of taking liberties between you and me, dear Kooie," said Mildred, with a smile. "I shall go with pleasure, and do my best for your boy."

"I knew you would!—and it will do you good too,

Miss Milly—Mrs. Wood, I mean; but it will be ten days and more before he can travel. I'll just get my pen and ink, and you'll help me to put it all down right—for you know I am but a poor scholar. I should like to know what Mrs. Carver will charge, and settle everything well beforehand."

This prospect of change was cheering to Mildred; and while her old friend applied herself to the task of composition, she wrote a few lines to Leigh, informing him of the project.

The progress made by Dick, once he was allowed to leave his room, was so rapid, that he was able to move a day or two sooner than his mother anticipated: and all things were prepared for their departure.

Mildred was a little disappointed not to see Leigh before she left; but he explained his absence in a note. He was obliged, he said, to go to Paris on business for a few days; but he would be sure to give her the earliest notice of any letter from Trevor; she must therefore let him have her new address at once.

It was a bright day in the first week of February when Mildred and her charge arrived at their destination, after a quiet midday journey, which Dick bore better than she expected.

A neat little parlour, with a couple of bedrooms, were ready swept and garnished for their reception, in a comfortable rambling house, under the shelter of the East Cliff, and a hearty welcome from Mrs. Leavett's friend, who had been cook and housekeeper in a wealthy family, from which office she retired into private life on her marriage with the butler.

A cheerful fire, the look-out over a wide stretch of green-blue sea tumbling in short waves and flecked

with foamy crests, the embodiment of playful strength; the fresh briny air, though chill with the rawness of early spring—were very pleasant after the close confinement in a small house and a dull street.

Dick stationed himself delightedly in the window, and the landlady descended to hold counsel with her eldest daughter.

"I declare, Mrs. Leavett's niece is altogether different from what I expected! Why, she is a lady—a real lady, I mean! When I told Mrs. Leavett it would be snugger and cheaper for her niece and the boy to eat with us, I never thought she would be like that. I wouldn't be comfortable sitting down with her. I'll just offer to give her a bit of dinner in the parlour, and Dick can eat with us. You go up with the tray, Bella, and tell me if you ever saw a more elegant lady."

The tact of the observant Mrs. Carver provided Mildred with the great comfort of having her meals alone, while Dick had the advantage of dining merrily with the family, in a downstairs living-room, where he soon made friends with a young daughter of their hostess, who was always ready after school-hours to join him in his efforts to draw or paint, or to read aloud, and otherwise amuse him.

Mildred herself always accompanied him in his morning's drive or walk, assisted him so far as her small skill went with his pictures, and soon finding that a few lessons were not unacceptable as a change of pastime, added an hour's study to the list of occupations. In the afternoon, however, she let him indulge his very natural tendency to play downstairs with the children of the house, and was re-

warded for her sympathetic care by seeing him improve rapidly.

The hours thus secured to herself were very precious. She often indulged in long rambles when the tide was low at the foot of the great cliffs which stretched beyond her dwelling. She worked diligently, and wrote long letters to good kind Mrs. Leavett. But above and through all she thought continuously of the terrible letter she promised to write as soon as she was sure that Arthur was installed in his old quarters in Calcutta. What would be the outcome of it?

Deep in these thoughts, Mildred walked slowly along the sands towards the zigzag path leading up to the coastguard station one fine mild evening, as the sun was setting behind the western heights—so deep that she did not heed rapidly-advancing footsteps, which, indeed, made little sound on the soft sand. She was therefore startled almost to screaming when the voice she had been vaguely wishing to hear addressed her.

"I had begun to fear I was not on your track, Mrs. Wood;" and turning, she found herself face to face with Brian Leigh.

"Ah!" she cried, stretching out her hand to him, while her large, soft, lovely eyes lit up with unmistakable joy, "I am so glad to see you! You have some news for me?"

"I have not, indeed! It is barely time to have a reply to my letter. Returning from Paris, I could not pass through without exchanging a word with you."

He held her hand while he spoke.

"Thank you very, very much!" she said, with the

frank gratitude which always touched him. "Are you going on to-night?"

"No, nor perhaps to-morrow—at least, there is no pressing reason for my doing so; and—do not let me shorten your ramble this fine evening. I may come with you, may I not? I heard at your lodgings that you had gone to walk on the beach, and I followed."

CHAPTER VI.

And now half Mildred's doubts and dread were dispersed or lulled. There was nothing new to discuss respecting her own affairs, and Leigh entertained her with talk about general news, politics, and the success of his own book, of which he had brought her a copy; and an account of certain offers made him by a well-known firm of publishers for another work of the same nature, respecting which he hesitated, as it would oblige him to leave England for a considerable time. The relief of being thus drawn out of herself—of being put in communication with the natural unconcealed world of everyday action—was like new life to Mildred. She grew animated, interested, responsive.

"I shall be so glad to read your book!" she exclaimed; "it will be like hearing you speak. Did you leave it at the house?"

"No; I will bring it to you to-morrow," returned Leigh.

"What delight it must be to write! I sometimes think of trying; but I fear I should never find anything to say."

"Try; it will amuse you, even if you did not succeed."

"I will. And you will look at my lucubrations if I think them worth submitting to you?"

"Certainly; I think I could see if you had it in you to write or not."

"You know I must do something; my money will not last for ever. *My* money!—the money I stole from that good, generous Mr. Gribble, to apply to the last purpose he would have approved!"

"I don't think he would disapprove if he could realize how impossible your life had become. Had your character been slighter, your nature of the kind that satisfies itself with husks when better food is unattainable, you might have borne your existence; but for such as you there was no compensation, and I confess I am glad you burst your degrading bonds."

"You are? It comforts me to hear you say so, but it does not blind me. Let us turn; it will be dusk before we reach East Cliff. And you will not write the book they want for the present? I am selfish enough to be glad you are not to leave England just yet—not until I know what Arthur will do."

"I promise readily, faithfully, not to leave you till you are under your brother's protection, or at least in full correspondence with him."

"That is too much!" said Mildred gravely; "I have no claim—no right to expect you to promise so much."

"Do not imagine it is the slightest obligation," exclaimed Leigh with earnestness. "It does not suit me to quit England for some months to come—in short, nothing I know of at present would induce me to do so."

"Then I am glad," said Mildred simply; and they walked on for some moments in silence.

"If you were my brother, what would you do on hearing I was alive?" asked Mildred suddenly.

"I should return at once. I should have an interview with Welby, and endeavour to make terms with him, and, working on his sensitiveness to opinion, win his agreement to a judicial separation. Then, with the detestable necessity for concealment removed, I should keep you with me. Even so, your life would be sufficiently overshadowed."

"Could this be accomplished?" asked Mildred thoughtfully. "Even if it could, there is a great difficulty. We have so little money."

"I imagine your friend Gribble would advance Carr funds which might be repaid. My dear Mrs. Wood, do not let us anticipate difficulties. It is enough to meet them as they arise. Try and rest your own mind by occupying your thoughts, as far as you can, with matters apart from yourself."

"I can do so while *you* are talking to me," returned Mildred, gazing dreamily out to sea. "But it is hard when I am alone."

"I can be here a good deal for the next few weeks," said Leigh in a low tone, and averting his eyes.

"Can you? Ah, would not Mrs. Griffith and Frank and everyone suspect some previous acquaintance, some mystery? They might get a clue to my history if they had the least idea you came to see me."

"You may be very sure I can throw them off the scent. I am supposed to be in Paris. None need know I have left. Leave all that to me. If my presence is of the smallest comfort do not forbid my seeing you, and your good old friend Mrs. Leavett——"

"Oh, she of course understands everything," interrupted Mildred.

Leigh looked at her, struck by her evident fearlessness of any evil construction being put upon their intercourse, and reflected that no surer indication of her freedom from any feeling warmer than grateful friendship for himself could have been given.

"I can run over to Paris any night, and show myself there. The *Electric Despatch* officials alone need to be in communication with me, and no editor or editor's *employé* gives addresses."

There was a pause. Mildred was astonished and deeply moved at this devotion to her service. Light began to penetrate through the scales which had hitherto blinded her; but Leigh continued:

"It suits me, I assure you, to remain quiet here just at present. I am thinking of writing something historical and descriptive about Canterbury; and I shall run over every day to study the old place; so pray do not suppose I am wasting my time." He ended with a smile so kind, so bright, that Mildred felt once more at rest.

"Do you know that a petition against Mr. Welby's election has been got up?" and Leigh proceeded to explain the objections urged, adding his own views as to the probabilities of his being unseated. Mildred was interested, and this topic brought them to her door.

"It is too late to ask you in," said Mildred; "but——"

"I may come to-morrow," cried Leigh eagerly "When?—what time suits you best?"

"After two o'clock. I am generally free in the afternoon."

"Thank you. And Mrs. Wood, should any news from Arthur—from your brother, reach you unexpectedly, should you want me in any way, I am not at the Lord Warden, I am at a quiet little hostelry called the Three Anchors, near the Inner Harbour."

"I shall not forget. Good-bye——"

"Till to-morrow," added Leigh, and raising his hat he walked on.

He had never been more deeply penetrated by the subtle charm which Mildred always possessed for him. The sense of their complete isolation from every tie that could interfere with their being all in all to each other overpowered him with an intoxicating consciousness of power. She was learning to lean upon him, too, more and more. She had separated herself virtually by death from the brutal animal who had held a husband's right over her—and Leigh gnashed his teeth at the thought—there was no creature to come between them, unless indeed she carried out her intention of writing, as he advised, a full confession to her brother. Otherwise, she might, without injury to anyone, be his—his beloved cherished companion; for though there was no lack of passion in his love for her—it cost him the strongest effort of self-control to keep his eyes from pouring into hers all the intense feeling for her which made his heart ache, to resist the impulse to crush her hand in a clinging pressure whenever he touched it—there was something of a higher and more lasting nature under the fire which leaped and quivered in his veins. She was a woman

who could listen sympathetically and answer intelligently. More, she had power and passion in her too, or she would never have dared and done and endured as she had.

If she loved him! He must not even wish for such a heaven. No; he must continue to urge upon her the necessity of claiming her brother's protection. It was the right thing to do—the conscientious, correct, cruel, infernally proper line of conduct. In the end, would it be better for her to drag on a dull, repressed, half-living life, overshadowed by the discredit which must in the eyes of ordinary people attach to her position and history? And the brother? Was he kind enough, strong enough, manly enough to cherish her, to keep her from the feeling of being a dependent, a drawback? Might it not be better for her to be his—wife to all seeming, watched over by a love tender, self-forgetful, anxious only to wipe out the memory of past sorrows, to———

But this was madness. He must get the better of such thoughts, such temptations. Moreover, soft and sympathetic as Mildred seemed, she was a force to be reckoned with; a false move might ruin him with her. She had her own ideas of right and wrong clear and distinct, and the courage that enabled her to break away from what was offensive and intolerable might give her strength to resist what was attractive, if life with him had any attraction of which he was by no means sure.

Well, whatever the future might bring, he should see her to-morrow, and drink deep of the charm that her frank confidence always gave to conversation—a confidence which it would be cruel folly to disturb.

His friendship might be of use and comfort to her. His love? might it after all be a misfortune?

* * * * *

Leigh exercised infinite caution in guarding his stay at the obscure little inn where he established himself from notice—from the possibility of being traced.

He carefully abstained from too frequent visits to Mildred's temporary home; sometimes going away to Canterbury for a day or two, and once travelling over to Paris, whence he wrote to various of his society friends, mentioning that he was going to move about for a while, and that their letters, if they wrote, must be addressed to the office of the newspaper with which he was connected. Dover had its dangers; but he contrived to avoid encounters with acquaintances, and, *per contra*, it would surprise no one to find him there.

He therefore gave himself up to the delight of those quiet hours when he ventured to sit by Mildred's fireside, talking of things past and to come—of books, of life; sometimes deigning to look at poor Dick's pencillings, when the boy was in the way, with a degree of interest certain to be excited by any attempts at drawing in a tolerable art critic. He gave the little lad excellent suggestions, and delighted him by his encouragement.

"The boy has decided taste; you must advise your friend Mrs. Leavett to let him follow it," he said.

"I wish you would be so very kind, when you go up to town, as to see her and tell her so," said Mildred one day, as the time fixed for their return drew near.

"She would be greatly gratified, and heed you more than she does me."

"Yes, of course I will, if you wish it; and I begin to think I must go up to town myself."

"I am sorry, of course. How have you got on with your study of Canterbury?"

"Not too successfully. You shall see it some day; but I am a little in awe of your judgment—you are no mean critic."

"You are laughing at me, Mr. Leigh. If that is the case, you must be elated by my opinion of your book of travels; I do not think I found any fault."

"Yes! you objected to some passages as cynical."

"Ah! they were not faults, though *I* disliked them; most people would consider them clever."

"Come, Mrs. Wood! it is bright, and even warm; will you not take a stroll under the cliffs? Enjoy this place while you can; you will find yourself terribly caged when you return to London."

"I fear I shall. Yes, I will go and put on my hat and cloak. Will you wait for me by the steps?"

Leigh obeyed; he preferred a ramble with her along the deserted beach, where they rarely encountered a solitary fisherman, even to the pleasure of sitting by her as she plied her needle in the little parlour looking out on the sea. She seemed more utterly his while they paced slowly beside the waves, as they murmured and caressed the shining yellow sands.

"I sometimes think it has been almost unwise to

be here so much," said Mildred, after they had walked a little way in silence. "It would seem very strange to any of your friends who discovered it that you had been here—how long? nearly three weeks?"

"Not always here; I have broken up the time very judiciously. I do not think I can in any way be traced—that must be guarded against."

"It has been a great pleasure to me to see and talk with you, of course," said Mildred. "I am glad you had work to do so near. I find I rather dislike the idea of returning to London. I think of recommending Mrs. Leavett to let us remain a little longer. It would really do Dick good, and I do not think she would count the cost."

"It would certainly do *you* good," said Leigh quickly.

"I feel as if I could wait more patiently for news of Arthur here," said Mildred. "Oh, how shall I bear the dreadful time which must elapse between my own letter to him and his reply? I wish I could stay on here and see you sometimes; you always give me courage."

"Could it not be managed?" cried Leigh eagerly, his heart beating quick at her words. "You are a free agent—Mrs. Leavett has no right to interfere. You would be infinitely better here. I might come——"

"Ah no! Don't you see you must not be imprudent, Mr. Leigh?" interrupted Mildred.

Leigh was silent; he shrank from the idea of alarming her—of awakening her from the quiet security which preoccupation and inexperience created.

"We must wait for Carr's letter, or Trevor's accouut of him, before we can form any plans. I have no

doubt Mrs. Griffith will try to win back her favourite secretary," he said at last, with a grave smile. "What is your own idea about returning to her?"

"I have none. I do not like to let her dismiss a person who suits her tolerably well, when I am so uncertain if I can stay with her. And I *must* do something; even if all goes well between Arthur and myself I cannot live on him. I must work—and there is not much for me to do. A sick-nurse would be the proper *rôle* for a penitent, as I ought to be; but I am ashamed to say I do not feel attracted to it."

Leigh gave a kind of suppressed moan.

"There is no use in talking of the future till I know how my brother may decide my destiny. You see, I do not now hesitate to follow your advice."

"It is a serious responsibility for me," said Leigh, letting his eyes rest upon her gravely and earnestly. "God grant I have counselled you wisely!"

"Have you any doubt?" cried Mildred uneasily. "Oh, think well before you let me write to him; and think if it would be injurious for him to be hampered with a sister who must be always more or less under a cloud! Perhaps it would be better—juster—to bear the ills I have, than draw another into them!"

"But I do think of you only!" cried Leigh; "I care for no other interest! Besides this, I feel sure that Carr would be infinitely distressed if he discovered hereafter that you had hesitated, that you had refrained from telling him you were still alive."

"He always loved me," said Mildred softly.

"Loved you!" repeated Leigh, with irrepressible tenderness; "how could he do otherwise?"

The words, the tone startled Mildred with a glimpse of the possibility which was coming near her, and made her conscious of being alone with Leigh as she never was before.

"It must be late!" she exclaimed. "We ought to return, though it is pleasant here."

"Come on as far as that advancing angle of cliff. There is a view of the town and pier from it," urged Leigh, with unusual entreaty. Mildred silently acceded. "I often question the wisdom of relinquishing a positive present happiness or enjoyment for a doubtful future good," he exclaimed with sudden impetuosity. "Life is so short, its glimpses of heaven so few, that it is well to grasp what we long for—what we thirst to taste—when and how we can."

"That depends on what it costs us—on the forfeit we shall have to pay! The doctrine is tempting"—and she sighed—"but it is false."

"Tempting—aye, desperately tempting!" murmured Leigh, and then relapsed into silence.

"When do you go to London?" asked Mildred, after they had turned their steps homeward.

"I ought to go to-morrow, but I shall stay till the day after."

"Why not go to-morrow if you ought?"

"You are hard, Mrs. Wood! Do you wish me to go?"

"By no means, as far as I am concerned—but it might be better if you did."

Was it possible she feared his remaining—that she distrusted him or herself—or the construction that

might be put upon his visits? She must be lulled—she must *not* awake to the character their friendship was assuming.

"Perhaps I had better go to-morrow," he said quietly. "You will let me know how matters are going on. You *may* have news of your brother before I have. It is very likely he will have written to Mrs. Leavett on his return to Calcutta."

"He may—but it is a mere chance. We cannot suppose he will write regularly to Koo."

"There can be no objection, I suppose, to my coming down here on a Saturday, and having a talk over things in general with you on Sunday?" asked Leigh after a pause.

"I should think not!—if you will be so good as to take that trouble."

Leigh smiled, but kept his eyes on the ground.

"Then you will probably remain here a week or two longer?" he said.

"Probably; Mrs. Leavett will do what I wish in this."

"It is frightfully dull for you here! What have you to do? What have you to read?"

Mildred smiled.

"I do not think of being dull now," she said; "but I suppose the time will come when the memory of past pain and disgust will fade away, and then dulness and monotony will be disagreeable; but for the present I will try not to think of the future."

"I wish I had the gift of second sight!" exclaimed Leigh.

"Why? to foresee the course of my second life?" asked Mildred. "Better not. *I* have no wish to penetrate behind the veil."

These words brought them to her door.

"Then must it be good-bye?" said Leigh, as they paused.

"Yes," replied Mildred, with decision.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Wood. There is no interdict on an occasional packet of books which I shall choose with a view to your edification as well as your amusement." He spoke in a lighter and more cheerful tone. "This is Thursday. I suppose I must not make my appearance until next Saturday week?"

"No; it would be better not."

"I shall take the last train to town this evening, and probably see Mrs. Griffith to-morrow. Shall I write an account of our interview?"

"Pray do! I shall be very glad to hear of her."

* * * * *

Though Leigh found some rather important work awaiting him, and a pile of invitations, he made time to call on Mrs. Griffith a day or two after his return, and was greeted with wonderful cordiality.

"What kept you so long in Paris, Brian? I should have thought you were required to produce the usual number of columns of pernicious trash for your paper during the session."

"Oh! I am not a writer of daily leading articles; I am a sort of irregular light horseman, good for correspondence and occasional topics. I had business in Paris, and shall probably go over again in a week or two."

"Hum! It is a vagabond life! This has been rather a miserable winter: all the people I like have been away. Mr. Ferrers and Gwendoline will not return till the end of April; not that they are special favourites, but I am used to them, and they belong to me. Godfrey is still at Pau. Between us strictly, Brian, I have great hopes about Godfrey—he is a good deal with the Vernons. The daughter is a beautiful, high-bred gentlewoman, and would be the wife of all others I should choose for my eldest son. She would rouse his ambition, and bring rank and fortune into the family. He is hard to please, but I don't think any man can expect more than Dorothea Vernon possesses. God knows I want something to console me for the *fiasco* that foolish boy Frank has made!"

"Poor Frank! He writes very despondingly," said Leigh. "The young lady's father, now that you have refused your consent, has turned to flint also, so the unhappy lovers have a stony time of it!"

"Has he?" cried Mrs. Griffith. "Then Frank will have to give in, and perhaps, disgusted with the inane, fruitless folly of calf-love, he will be wise, and marry Gwendoline Ferrers."

"I doubt it."

"But, Brian, you have influence. Why don't you persuade him to give up this obscure girl?"

"I am not so disposed, Mrs. Griffith," said Leigh, rising restlessly and coming over to the fireplace. "I am sorry he ever fell into this entanglement, but I don't see the sense of giving up what might be, probably would be, decided happiness during a few years at least—for what? the chopped straw of social success,

small ambitions, material luxury. Frank and I are Bohemians; we are easily pleased in some directions —we like the good things of life, the highest possible flavour in our daily dishes—but we don't care if they be served in crown Derby or in delf, pewter or silver, so long as life is decent and independent!"

"It strikes me," returned Mrs. Griffith slowly, "that you are in love yourself, Brian, with some actress or other ineligible female. I always thought your sensible liking for married women would be your salvation. If *you* make a fool of yourself, I shall be even more disgusted than with Frank. You *ought* to be ambitious."

"I am not without ambition," returned Leigh, smiling at her solemnity. "But it is not of an order to be affected by my love affairs."

"Love affairs? Of course not. But marriage is a very different matter. Though I am in sympathy with you in various ways, I don't understand you, Brian. Certain things, of great value to most men, seem of no account with you."

"My dear Mrs. Griffith, I cannot account for myself. Tell me some news. What of the Fitzhughs? Where is Mrs. Egerton?"

Thus encouraged, Mrs. Griffith poured forth a volume of good and evil report, the latter largely predominating, to which Leigh listened, wondering the while that she made no mention of her favourite secretary. He rather wished Mildred to return to her former post. It would secure frequent unconcealed means of communication, though he detested the idea of her being brought in contact with Colonel Griffith.

Still, it was an easy and not unpleasant means of providing for her needs. At last he rose to take leave.

"I am glad you have come back, Brian. Let me see you as often as you can. Is it not strange that Mrs. Wood has never made any sign since that tiresome boy had scarlet fever quite two months ago? I told her she might telegraph to me when all danger was over, and she has never done so."

"Indeed! Why don't you send one of the servants to inquire?"

"Is it quite safe?"

"I should think so. Doesn't your present amanuensis suit you?"

"She is not bad; but after being accustomed to a gentlewoman like Mrs. Wood, I miss her greatly. I shall solve her mystery yet. If you possessed the penetration which ought to belong to your profession, you would find out all about her for me, Brian."

"I must decline to turn detective, even for you, Mrs. Griffith."

It was a busy week, yet Leigh managed to write a long account of this interview to Mildred, asking her to make up her mind on the question of returning to the blind lady's service before he came down the following Saturday.

Time went quickly yet slowly till the hour (a late one) came when he could return to the place from which he had torn himself with such reluctance.

He was welcomed brightly. The weather was propitious, and a long ramble along the heights lent wings to the quiet Sabbath hours which went all too quickly.

But on the future neither Mildred nor her sympathetic companion cared to touch. The present was sufficient—more than sufficient.

With a promise to return the following week, Leigh took leave of his precious charge.

His visit had been peculiarly happy. Mildred was kind and calmly confidential. Whether her suspicions were allayed or whether they had ever been awakened, Leigh could not tell. He was content to bask in the quiet cordiality of her manner, to catch what fleeting joys he could.

During the next few days Leigh managed to delight Mrs. Leavett by calling on her and giving a report of her son and Mildred. The good woman had formed the highest opinion of Leigh, and had utterly forgotten all the doubts with which she had originally regarded him. He found that Mildred had suggested the prudence of remaining a little longer in the pure sea air, to which proposition Mrs. Leavett had immediately acceded.

It was late the following day when Leigh returned to his chambers, and his first act was to examine a number of letters which had accumulated in his absence. His eye was at once caught by one in Trevor's writing, but he glanced quickly through the others before he sat down by the fire to read it quietly and deliberately.

After thanking Leigh for taking the trouble to write to him, with something of surprise that he should do so tinging his expressions, Trevor proceeded to touch on his own affairs, and then to deplore Frank Griffith's troubles which had been confided to him.

Next came the topic for which Leigh had looked so eagerly.

"I have great news of Carr. He has returned to Calcutta, and is in high favour. He is going to be married to the only daughter of Oakeley, one of Gribble's partners, who has a pot of money. In fact, his fortune is made. I am very glad of it. He is a good fellow, and a good-looking fellow into the bargain. We have been great chums since I came out here. If his poor sister could look out of her dreadful grave, how delighted she would be to know his troubles—his money troubles at least—were over! The bride-elect is a nice and rather pretty girl, a little prim and stiff; but Carr will take the starch out of her. We were dining together last night, and had a long talk over old times, agreeing that it was amazing what men can live through, get over, and go on as before. Carr seems quite well and strong now, but he was uncommonly shaky when he first came out.

"What is Godfrey doing with himself? You never mention him."

A few more inquiries, and the letter ended.

Leigh laid it on the table, and sat staring at the fire in the deepest thought. Arthur Carr going to be married—perhaps married by that time! This was a most unexpected turn in Mildred's affairs. She would unquestionably shrink from giving her confidence to a strange young woman; for that was what writing to

her brother really meant. This marriage almost forbade her communication with him. It would fill her with despair. Where could she turn? how should he counsel her?

He started up and paced the room long and restlessly, viewing the position from all sides, resisting as best he could the wild, sweet suggestions of tenderness and passion. She was so utterly alone! She had already broken all social bonds—she had no duties to any living being now; why should she not let the dead past bury its dead? He felt he could be more to her than anyone else ever was—ever would be; and of himself he felt sure, as he never had been before. In his love for her were some ingredients which would bear the rudest strain.

Leigh was clear-sighted, and had never deceived himself as to the aspect of what he contemplated; but he was also resolute, and ready to brave consequences in pursuit of what he made up his mind to desire. The possibility of a future, socially obscure, but busy and fruitful of fame, sweetened and beautified by the companionship of a beloved woman, grew more and more irresistibly clear and tempting, if—all depended on that "if"—she was disposed to love him. And to this question there was no answer.

That she trusted him—that she was warmly grateful to him—there could be no doubt; but the unembarrassed frankness of her speech and manner, the absence of all the little inconsistencies, the hesitations and reluctances—those unmistakable variations in Love's barometer—warned him that no *ignus fatuus* of passion existed to dazzle and mislead her.

Far into the night Leigh debated with himself, straying further and further afield from the rugged, straight road of sound judgment, and succeeded in convincing himself that the best and happiest destiny for Mildred was to be his cherished companion—his wife in all but legality.

CHAPTER VII.

When Leigh sat down to read Trevor's letter it was already too late to catch the last train, but he was at Charing Cross in time next morning for the first express. When he reached his destination it was too early to present himself at East Cliff, and he had ample time for breakfast and a hasty toilette before he asked for admission.

"Yes," the servant-girl said, in answer to his inquiries; "Mrs. Wood was at home, but had a headache, and had not left her room; still, the gentleman had better walk in."

The little parlour was untenanted when Leigh entered, and he stood waiting near one of the windows, his heart beating quickly. He had not to wait long. The door leading into an inner room opened, and Mildred came in, a letter in her hand, her eyes dark and solemn—her very figure so expressive of despondency, that as she paused silently, as if too oppressed to speak, Leigh sprang to her side, and taking her cold hand in both his own, exclaimed:

"You know? you have heard?"

"I have—I had this letter just now, and I have been trying to write to you."

She gave him the letter she held as she spoke.

"Pray sit down! You are trembling—you can hardly stand.

He drew forward a chair, and, as she sank into it, resting her elbows on the table and covering her face with her hands, he stood by her and read as follows:

"DEAR OLD FRIEND,

"I have behaved very badly in leaving you so long without any tidings of my progress and adventures; but I have been to Shanghai and back since I last wrote, besides much more of stirring occupation which I have neither room nor time to describe."

He then continued to give a flourishing account of his success, and the confidence placed in him by his employers, of the increasing pleasure he took in his work, and the ambition beginning to dawn in his mind.

"I have, however, kept the greatest and best bit of news for the last. I am going to be married to a charming girl who is a great deal too good for me. Just imagine the change in a short twelvemonth!—from a broken-down, penniless vagabond to the trusted *employé* of a great house, the affianced husband of a pretty, elegant heiress. Of course it all comes of Gribble's backing-up. He has been a trump, and has proved his great regard for my dear sister, by his unbounded kindness to me. How I wish she could share the happiness I really owe to her! But great as our grief has been, Gribble and I were saying last night, it is better to know she is at rest, safe from all sorrow, than dragging out a wretched, hopeless existence, from

which there was no possibility of delivering her—my poor Milly! It would have been better for her to have died in her happy childhood!

"I know all this will please and interest you, for the sake of old times. I hope to revisit England one of these days, and introduce my dear little wife (that is to be) to my true and faithful 'Kooie,' as poor Mildred used to call you. My *fiancée* is very prettily prim and puritanical, easily shocked, and all that sort of thing, and evidently intends to convert her unorthodox intended. I have no doubt she can teach me a good deal; but I don't intend the teaching to be all on one side. Now, pray tell me all about yourself and your boy. I feel as if you were the only relic of my home left in the land of the living."

Some more friendly inquiries; a request for a reply, and the letter, which was evidently written in high spirits, ended.

Leigh laid it down without a word; the movement attracting her attention, Mildred uncovered her face, resting her hands clasped on the table, and raising her eyes, fixed them on his with an expression so wistful, so unconsciously imploring, as if her only hope of comfort was in him, that tenderest, purest pity melted his heart; and for a while Leigh felt as gently, simply kind as to some newly-orphaned, desolate child. For an instant he could not command his voice, and Mildred spoke first.

"It is all over, you see; I am quite blotted out." She spoke calmly, and taking up the letter, pointed to the passage, "It is better to know she is at rest,"

etc., and went on: "It would be obtrusive on my part to come to life again—there is no place for me!"

"My dear Mrs. Wood," cried Leigh, with a degree of agitation most unusual in him, "it is but natural that so terrible a disappointment should upset you; I was infinitely distressed myself when I read Trevor's letter. (I have had one from him.) But you must not despair, you must not give way. Let us rally our forces, and see what is the next best thing to be done; all is not lost."

"I think it is," returned Mildred, still looking at the letter; "even Mr. Gribble is satisfied that all is for the best; I dare not intrude upon him. I must resign myself to be a shadowy ghost for the rest of my days —and I am so terribly young! You see, they are kind, they loved me, but I have dropped out of their lives; I should only work mischief and trouble were I to reappear! Yet, dreary as the outlook is, it does not make me wish what I have done undone! To-day I am beaten to the earth, but I shall gather up my forces again—when I realize that I *must* face the future alone—that there is no alternative."

She slowly folded up the letter as she spoke, again raising her eyes to his—hopeless, tearless eyes, whose steadiness contrasted with the pathetic tremor of her lips.

Leigh's uncertainty was swept away by the tide of tenderness and passionate admiration which flooded his heart and spoke in his glance, suddenly revealing to Mildred all that she had latterly tried not to see; a blush mounted in her cheek, passing quickly away, and leaving her paler than before, but it was enough to show Leigh that he was understood.

"There *is* an alternative," he said, in a low, husky tone, which grew clear and more impassioned as he went on, "if you will accept it! Take my life in place of the one you have resigned. I am yours; if you think I can in any way supply that of which your cruel circumstances have robbed you, I ask nothing better than to do so! for you must know, you must feel that I love you—love you! the words do not exist that can express *how* I love you!"

He threw himself into a chair opposite hers, and resting his arms on the table, leant towards her.

Mildred met his glance for a moment with a look of fear, of bewilderment; then covered her eyes with her hand, and sat still and silent.

"Forgive me," he continued, "but I cannot keep silence. I have tried hard to be a disinterested friend; I would have readily assisted to restore you to your brother, to promote your happiness in any way, at any cost to myself; but it is not to be by self-sacrifice I can help you. It is fate; will you accept it?"

He paused, but Mildred, who was trembling almost visibly, made no reply.

"Hear me," resumed Leigh; "you are absolutely free, you break no tie, you injure no one by entrusting your future with me. I am unfettered, I can work as well out of England as in it; a few years' residence abroad, an intimation to one or two friends that I am married, and none will ever know that you are not legally what you seem and what you will actually be —my beloved and honoured wife! You are a brave woman, and you have a long, lonely stretch of years before you; will you not risk something to exchange

this barrenness for the warmth and tenderness I know I can give you? Is it possible that love so deep, so intense as I feel for you could exist if you had not some sympathetic feeling for me? Mildred, can you, do you love me?"

She took away her hand from her face, and looked straight into his eyes, a smile quivering over her lips.

"Yes," she said very softly, as if to herself, "I do love you."

Leigh's face lit up into absolute beauty with the delight her words inspired, yet he did not attempt even to take her hand, which lay white and motionless upon the table; he started up and stood erect, triumphant.

"Then you will let me try to make you happy! By heaven! I am giddy with the thought of the life before us! Think of the joy of everyday companionship! of every hope, ambition, undertaking shared! Mildred, do you feel a tenth part what I do! You cannot! or you would not be so pale—so still——"

. She silently, quietly stretched out her hand, which he seized and covered with kisses; then pressing it against his heart, he went on:

"Why should that brute Welby live for ever? He is many years my senior. He may die like other men. Then, the obstacle removed, our real marriage can be legalized. Why do you look so sad, Mildred? Do you not see there is no obstacle to our union—to a future passed together?"

"I see," she returned with inexpressible soft sadness, "that such a future is impossible;" and she quietly withdrew her hand.

"Why? surely you do not think there is any sin in such a union?"

"I think there is a certain degree of crime in deliberately outraging laws under which we live; I think such crime brings down severe punishment—punishment that would fall on you as well as on me. I will *not* add the wrong-doing of such a life to the wrong I have already committed! Do not tempt me. At least, I have always had the consolation of knowing that no unfaithfulness to a man I detested sullied my life: I will *not* give it up."

"You are cheating yourself with phrases," said Leigh sternly. "If you have given me your heart, where is your faithfulness? You cannot love, or you would not argue thus. It is easy for the cold to be discreet!"

"Cold!" repeated Mildred; then her self-control gave way, and she burst into passionate tears: "You do not know how I long for the life you describe!"

This confession stirred Leigh's soul to its depths. He poured forth prayers and persuasions, and drew the most vivid pictures of the existence which awaited them; but all was in vain.

"That I do not resent your urging me to such a course," said Mildred, when at last he grew sullenly silent, and walking to the window leant his arm against the frame, and his head upon it, "must show you that I am but too strongly in sympathy with you. I believe that you are blinded for the moment. I cannot, and do not doubt that you are moved by real affection for me; nevertheless, I must not listen. It would be utter weakness," she went on with increasing impressiveness; "you are wiser, stronger, more experienced than

I am, but my instinct is true. *Now*, should detection overtake me, it would be evident that I fled from the intolerable degradation of a detestable marriage, to labour humbly and honestly to get my own living. If I listened to you I should be simply an ordinary self-indulgent woman, escaping from her wifely duties to throw herself into the arms of a lover."

A deep blush spread over cheek and throat as she spoke.

"Can you wish me to fall so low? I have done wrong, according to accepted rules; I will *not* add this evil to the rest. And for you, too, a life of deception, or of open disregard of social respect, would be fatal. I cannot be angry with you—I believe in you; but I want you to see with my eyes, and—Ah! speak to me! Do not turn away! It wrings my heart to reject you!" and she started up.

"Then why are you so hard?" cried Leigh, turning quickly; and taking her hand, he drew her to the sofa, placing himself beside her, and looking into her eyes with yearning tenderness. "Many a woman, who has done infinitely worse, than giving her new unfettered life to the man she loves,—is reinstated in the world's opinion by time, by quiet attention to appearances, by absence — by a thousand chances and changes. You would lose nothing by——"

"I should lose myself in my own eyes!" she interrupted.

There was a pause.

"And you love me?" asked Leigh, in a wondering tone.

"And I love you!" repeated Mildred softly, solemnly.

Leigh released her hand, walked down the room and back, then standing before her, exclaimed:

"It is a bitter disappointment. When I knew your last hope was cut away, I thought I surely might be all in all to you. I did not think so brave a woman would have shrunk from the comparatively small risk I propose."

"I cannot brave my own sense of right," said Mildred.

"And I could not imagine your sense of right would take such a view," returned Leigh. "But I must accept your decision. Tell me, Mildred, are you going to forbid me to appear in your presence, or make any other highly virtuous conditions?"

She smiled sadly.

"No; if you still care enough—if it does not vex or distress you, I should be glad——"

Her voice broke, and she stopped suddenly.

"Good God! I am only adding to your sorrow—to your trials!" cried Leigh, deeply moved, and again taking her hand as he sat down beside her. "Listen to me! If you will let me come to you, and be of use to you, I will not breathe a word of the hopes and wishes I have dared to form—not, at least, till some change in your circumstances makes such words allowable. Now, before I leave you, you must give me a promise that should Welby (who is not immortal) —should the brute die, you will be my wife."

"There will be many changes before that takes place," said Mildred. "He may outlive us both."

"It is not probable."

"Don't grudge him his life, such as it is!" she exclaimed.

"I do. But long or short, will you give me that promise? Say, 'Brian, I will be yours whenever I am free!'"

She smiled, and raising her eyes to his, said:

"Brian, I will be your wife whenever I am free—*if* you ask me,—and you are free until you do."

"Thank you, dearest, beloved! I understand the reservation. Another promise. Will you look on me as your affianced husband, and let me advise and help and influence you? Will you give me your complete confidence?"

"I will."

"I am satisfied for the present," said Leigh. "Remember, I look on you as my own—as you will yet be in the sight of all men."

His eyes, his voice thrilled through Mildred's heart with a strange, sweet terror. Should she always be able to resist him?

"Your friendship may be of infinite comfort to me," she said with emphasis.

"There should always be a basis of friendship in love," returned Leigh, smiling as he kissed her hand. "I give you both, and will try to keep the friendship uppermost."

"I must see very little of either," exclaimed Mildred. "You must be most careful, for every reason."

"I know it—I dread it! The desperate difficulty of meeting with any safety was one of the many motives which drove me to think of the heaven of being with you always."

"Now you must leave me. I want to think—to rest, and somehow I cannot do either when you are here. I have been so shaken by this letter—by you——"

"Is this the first-fruits of our loving friendship," asked Leigh, "that you banish me?"

"Even so. I feel I must be alone."

"Then I obey," said he. "May I not return this evening before I go up to town?"

"I think not. It is better not."

"Till Sunday, then, good-bye. Tell me once more you love me."

"I will not," returned Mildred, letting her eyes say so all the time. "For the present, we are good true friends." A long look, a hand-pressure, and he was gone.

Though checked and disappointed, Leigh was not dissatisfied with the results of his interview. She had confessed she loved him, and how nobly frank, how free from all petty hesitations, all small scruples, the confession was! Her firmness surprised him, while it extorted his respect, and added fuel to the strong fire already burning in his heart. How glorious the full unconcealed love of such a woman would be! And sooner or later she would be his. A certain degree of tranquillity settled down upon his spirit as he thought that a full understanding had been established between them, that she had given him a promise of complete confidence, and on her promise he felt he could rely. Then Sunday was but two days off, and he should again look into her eyes, and hold her hand—that was all. He dared not think of more. Heaven! what a beggarly account of caresses for so greedy a love as his!

And Mildred, locked into the privacy of her own room, relieved her heart by a long passionate fit of weeping. But they were not bitter tears. Oh no!

Under all her disappointment respecting Arthur—and she felt how a puritanical wife would render communication with him impossible—in spite of the shock which her conversation with Leigh had given her, the sense of being loved, fondly, tenderly loved, sent currents of sweet subtle joy shivering through her veins, as notes of painfully delicious melody thrill through a sensitive listener like darts of icy fire. It was her very first experience of the most potent passion that can move the heart; and her attachment to Leigh had grown so silently, slowly, surely from their first meeting, that she now felt amazed and overpowered by the vigour with which it leaped into glowing life at the spell of his first words. How they repeated themselves over and over in her ears! How soft yet firm his tones sounded! How his eyes had drawn hers to answer their language! She trembled at the idea of the power he held over her. Even were she free she thought she would try to resist it. As it was, she *must*. Nothing should make her listen to the entrancing project of being the companion of his daily life. The very passion of her own resolution warned her of its inherent weakness, and a sudden idea flashed upon her that she must seek safety by avowing her existence to Gribble, to her brother, to Welby, and braving the result—except the result of returning to the latter. That was an atonement more impossible than ever. But not yet. Time might bring some less terrible solution of her difficulties. So she gradually grew calmer, and applied herself to write a letter to Koo, enclosing Arthur's for her perusal, that self-denying woman always sending his epistles unopened.

* * * * *

The result of a long, delightful consultation between Mildred and Leigh on the following Sunday was transmitted to Eccleston Square next morning.

"There's a telegram for you, ma'am," said Davis, who had been called away from her mistress's forenoon toilette by a tap at the door.

"Well, read it; I dare say it is some important nothing from Miss Ferrers."

"'Mrs. Wood, Eastcliff, Dover, to Mrs. Griffith, Eccleston Square,'" read Davis.

"Ha!" ejaculated the blind lady, an expression of pleasure in her face; "go on."

"'Infection quite gone; I await communication.'"

"Good, very good!" cried Mrs. Griffith. "Davis, you must go to that grocer aunt of Mrs. Wood's this very day, and ascertain if they have whitewashed the place, and used disinfecting fluid, and destroyed the bed-clothes and things. I shall make Miss Bent write as soon as I have your report. It would be well to have Mrs. Wood back before we go to Pennogwen. She was the best—by far the best secretary I ever had. Wonderful young woman—I should like to know if any new chapter of her history has been opened up! Now I dare say Miss Bent will think herself ill-treated because I want Mrs. Wood back; but I only engaged her as a stopgap. Be sure you go and see that Mrs. What's-her-name to-day, Davis."

Davis ventured to say she had heard that Mrs. Leavett had taken due precautions, and that no one in the house had caught the fever.

"Heard! How have you heard, I should like to know? I hope none of you have been disobeying my orders, putting your heads into the lion's mouth."

"No, certainly not," Davis assured her lady; "it was only what the baker told cook."

"The baker!" shrieked Mrs. Griffith. "If *he* is reckless of contagion, who is safe?"

Davis quickly availed herself of the permission, and paid a long visit to the Morton Street store, bringing back so favourable an account that Mrs. Griffith dictated a short but decisive note to her favourite secretary:

"I am very glad you have had the sense to go out of town. I shall be happy to receive you. Let me know when you can return."

One more Sunday, at Leigh's urgent request, was spent by the "sad sea waves," and then Mildred went back to the routine of her old occupation—with a new trouble, it is true, but with renewed hope, reinvigorated vitality to endure it.

It is not necessary to describe Mrs. Leavett's joy and exultation at receiving her boy, bright, brown, and beaming with health—to welcome her dear young lady, and thank her for all the care she had lavished on Dick. She did not view Mr. Arthur's letter with the same despondency as his sister.

"It's a grand thing for him to get a nice, rich wife. Don't tell me she won't be proud to know a lady like you! Just you wait a bit."

Mrs. Griffith received Mildred with a sound scolding for her obstinacy in refusing to reside at Eccleston Square—a degree of contumacy which was justly punished by her banishment with that brat who caused all the mischief.

"Still, I am very glad to see you," continued the old lady. "I fancy there is more life in your voice

than before you went away. I think the change must have done you good. Don't run any more risks again. When we go down to Pennogwen, just make up your mind to remain with me permanently."

Mildred did not commit herself by her reply.

She quickly fell into the old routine—reading, writing, accompanying Mrs. Griffith in her drives, and sometimes seeing her visitors. Two or three times a week she exchanged a few words with Leigh, who was most discreet in his visits, but often wrote to her long, charming letters, sometimes sad, sometimes playful, always full of whatever occupied him, yet scarcely love-letters—rather the outpourings of an ordinarily reserved man to the chosen friend of his soul.

It was to Mildred the happiest time she had known since she had left her early home.

"I see," said Leigh one chill, blustery evening at the end of March, "that the attempt to unseat the new member for Middleborough has failed;" and reaching over the paper, he pointed out a leading article to Mildred.

"I suppose so," returned Mrs. Griffith. "These new men, with their well-lined pockets and well-instructed advisers, manage to sail very close to the wind with safety. I have ceased to take any interest in the matter. Has the beaten candidate found another seat?"

And while the blind lady and Leigh conversed, Mildred gathered that Welby had had a very close shave indeed. The *Times* and the Conservative papers handled him severely; those on the other side protested that "he left the court without a stain on his character."

Mildred pictured to herself as she read the annoyance and irritation these criticisms would cause their object, knowing Welby's nervous dread of disapprobation—his morbid desire to stand high in the estimation of his fellow-citizens. What a life he would lead those about him during the ordeal!

"You have been a very good fellow to me, I admit," Mrs. Griffith was saying when Mildred again listened to what was going on. "You have been unusually constant in your visits since you came from Paris; and, lonely as I am, they are most acceptable."

"They give me pleasure," said Leigh simply; but his eyes sought Mildred's, and said very distinctly what was the source of his pleasure.

Sometimes his looks gave her pain and anxiety. Often they expressed such gloom and dissatisfaction, not unmixed with impatience, that she thought sadly how she had brought him grief and trouble, rather than the happiness she would wish to bestow. To Mildred the few words she was able to exchange with him from time to time were sufficient to bring strength and comfort; but though careful not to transgress the bounds within which he had promised to keep, Leigh chafed against his fetters, and bruised his spirit by fruitless repinings against irresistible fate.

"Yes, I believe you do like a little talk with me," returned Mrs. Griffith complacently. "You ought to have been my son, Brian."

"Perhaps, had I been your son, my society would be less an amusing variety," he returned, laughing.

"I am sure it is more a variety to see my sons

than you!" exclaimed Mrs. Griffith, with some bitterness. "By the way, is there any chance of Frank coming to his senses?"

"I think not."

"I suspect he has none to come to."

Here the butler announced that Mr. Smiley was below, and wished to know if Mrs. Griffith would see him.

"Show him up," she returned. "Brian—Mrs. Wood—I don't want you. I must speak to my lawyer alone."

Mildred rose at once, and taking her little work-basket, left the room.

Leigh lingered a moment.

"I will say good-morning, then, as I am going to the Club."

He went slowly downstairs, and opened the library-door. Mildred, as he expected, was already there. She had taken up a book, and was standing by the fire; but her eyes were watching for him, and as they met his, a smile of welcome, bright and sweet as ever rejoiced a man's heart, lit up her face.

"You are glad to speak with me, Mildred?" he exclaimed, when, having closed the door, he took her hand, and gazed earnestly, eagerly into the eyes he loved.

"I am—very glad!" she returned, with a quick, short sigh. "I have wished to speak to you; but——"

"You are surely too cautious—too cruelly prudent!" interrupted Leigh, letting her gently draw away her hand. "You might with perfect safety let me sometimes come and see you; it would do no harm, and no one would be the wiser."

"It is still wiser not to come. Think of all the

gossip—the wretched doubts—which would spring up, if it were known that you ever came to visit Mrs. Griffith's secretary! Even my good old Koo would look grave if you came save on the rarest occasions."

"And what do you want to speak to me about?" asked Leigh, after a moment's pause.

"I scarcely know, now that I am face to face with you," she said, almost timidly. "But I think you look ill—worried; have you any especial trouble?"

"Good God, Mildred! how can you ask such a question? Can't you understand that my life is often almost unbearable? You are 'so near, and yet so far'! to see you constantly, and feel the pressure of the invisible barrier that keeps you from me! to know there is only endurance now, and little hope in the future!"

Mildred grew white and cold at this outburst—his passion frightened her; but she recovered herself quickly.

"I have only brought you pain and sorrow," she said, letting her clasped hands drop. "It would be better if you had never met me!"

"No!" cried Leigh, turning to her. "I would not forego the sweetness of having known you, whatever it may cost me. Only give me some compensation for what I undergo. Give me a quiet hour of confidential talk sometimes."

"It would be better if—if you were not so near," said Mildred thoughtfully. "I must (at present, at least) disturb and unsettle you. Your work, your engagements keep you here. But the world is open to me. Could I not find something to do elsewhere? You once spoke of friends in Paris who might find me

employment." She paused and mused for an instant. Leigh looked at her with an expression of surprise. "I cannot support the idea of having an evil influence upon you."

"What!" cried Leigh; "would you sacrifice the comfort and security of your present abode to spare me the delicious torment of being near and yet parted from you? My darling, were you in Paris, how long do you think should I stay in London? Don't you understand I might get a mission any day that would take me far away. But I will not leave because you are here, and you might want me. When, long ago, in those distant poverty-stricken days, when I dared not speak to you openly, I suggested your going abroad, it was partly because I feared that overbearing insolent animal Godfrey Griffith might annoy you, partly because there would be greater opportunities of seeing you without restraint."

"What, even then!" said Mildred, covering her face with her hands lest he might see the strange joy and exultation that made her feel faint and dizzy.

"After all, Mildred," he continued as he returned to the fireplace after walking restlessly away, "you are the best man of the two. You make me blush for my own brutal selfishness and impatience." He threw himself into an arm-chair and was silent for a moment. "I have been contemptibly weak, and have been torturing you. I am determined to control this rebellion against the inevitable. You shall see that I can be brave and strong as yourself. Give me your hand. You love me, Mildred? You forgive me for tormenting you?"

"Ah, Brian," laying her other hand on his, "I only

want to see you happy and successful. Would to God I were not a hindrance! Give your thoughts to your work, to your career. To know that you are worthy of yourself is all I ask."

"I must try for a higher standard than that," said he with a smile. He held her hand for an instant longer in silence, and then exclaimed, "But you must let me see you at home the day after to-morrow. Frank will be in London to-night on his way to Ireland. He writes in the highest spirits, but reserves all news till we meet. I must come and give you a report. You cannot refuse this time. I have only invaded Morton Street once since you came back."

Mildred thought a moment, then, raising her eyes with a look of pleasure that thrilled through him, said:

"Yes, you may come; and now you had better go. Mrs. Griffith will soon send for me."

* * * * *

Mrs. Leavett was duly prepared for Leigh's coming. She was deeply interested in Frank Griffith's story, and it seemed natural enough that Mr. Leigh should come and talk about it to her young lady.

But the ex-lady's-maid was too shrewd not to suspect that it was something more than an ordinary amount of interest that brought the "nice, pleasant-spoken gentleman" to see her supposed niece.

"Ah! that would have been the husband for her, poor dear!" she would say to herself, "and if the Lord would only take Welby out of the way, her husband he would be, I suspect. Still, for all that, it wouldn't do to have him here often."

It was a very happy evening to Mildred and to Leigh. He was true to his promise, and had roused himself to look and to be calm, bright, and entertaining.

Frank had come and gone. He had been sent for rather suddenly by Lord Milford (the relative who had promised him his agency), to join him in Ireland and view the property he was to administer, and the residence provided for him. On his return he hoped all matters would be finally arranged, and he would then be justified in renewing his proposal to Mr. Burton with the full expectation of being accepted by the father, as well as the daughter.

Miss Burton had been called back to the paternal roof a week or two previously, but Frank had remained on at Brussels, as he had no chance of seeing his beloved in London. He had greatly enjoyed his visit to the Belgian capital, for, being totally unknown to Miss Dollie's aunt, they had frequent opportunities of meeting, which were all the more delightful from the small difficulties which hedged them round.

"I wish there were some chance of Mrs. Griffith being reconciled to her son's marriage," said Mildred, as Leigh rose to bid her good-night. "It must be painful to him, and also to Miss Burton, this strong disapprobation on the mother's part."

"I don't very well see how it can be otherwise. Given such a connection, and a character like Mrs. Griffith, why, opposition is inevitable. But Frank is old enough to choose for himself, and if he is not obliged to ask his mother to maintain him he is in his right. Still, it is a pity to see mother and son drifting hopelessly apart."

"It is dreadful!" exclaimed Mildred.

"I had nearly forgotten a word of warning," resumed Leigh—"yet I was full of it as I came here. "Do you think Lady Mary Dacre knows your handwriting?"

"No, I am sure she does not. Why?"

"I had a letter from her to-day, and she says she is going to write to Mrs. Griffith—so you will have to reply. By the way, her object in writing is to know if she can come to Pennogwen in June. I fear Pennogwen will hardly be safe for you this summer. Mrs. Griffith talks of asking the Fitzhughs, and Fitzhugh will be sure to recognise you."

"Ah!" cried Mildred—a long drawn "Ah!"—while she unconsciously laid her hand on his arm, "dangers compass me round, and press me in on every side!"

Leigh kept very still, that she should not perceive how her fingers involuntarily tightened their hold.

"You can easily avoid them."

"If these people come to Mrs. Griffith, I am scarcely safe even *here*. I shall have to think of another asylum."

"You are safe yet awhile. I will keep good watch, and meantime we must make some plan for the future. I have an idea there will be trouble in Paris before long. I should not like you to go there, but we have time to consider. Trust to my vigilance, and promise me you will not lie awake conjuring up horrors."

"I will try not."

"Well, I must go. Are you satisfied with the effect of your lecture and your example?"

"Yes! you are good and sensible."

"Good-night! I do not think parting is such sweet sorrow. Do you?"

"No! but it must be endured like other inevitable things. Good-night."

CHAPTER VIII.

In spite of her promise to Leigh, and an honest effort to keep it, Mildred did lie long awake, thinking how the sure shelter she thought encompassed her was crumbling away. It is true that Leigh would probably be able to warn and to save her, but the conviction that she was to lead more or less a hunted life grew painfully strong.

Nor did she think of herself alone. How would such continued watchfulness and suppression affect Leigh? Not for good, certainly. If his love for her could stand a long continuance of so irksome and unnatural an existence (and "if" was always present to her mind), it would exhaust and irritate him, rendering him unfit for literary work. If, as was not improbable, his affection gave way under so severe a strain, the position would be still more painful. He would never voluntarily break away from her — of this she was sure—and to her would fall the bitter task of detecting the change in him, and setting him free.

Like most women, she exaggerated to herself the mental power of the man she loved. She anticipated for him the highest literary success if his career was not checked and spoiled by his connection with her! Moreover, she felt that every day he exercised more and more influence upon her,—that every interview

and every letter, whether any word of love was spoken between them or not, made him more beloved, more necessary to her—that he was for ever in her thoughts, and that she longed to see him from the moment they parted till they met again.

How long, with this ever-increasing devotion undermining the citadel of her will, could she resist the perpetual though unspoken prayer which breathed in his voice and gleamed in his eyes? He might be loyally silent as to the project she had refused, but she knew she had neither convinced him nor persuaded him to renounce it. Worse than all was the desperate longing of her own heart to yield: yet she saw clearly, vividly, all the wrong, the evil consequences which would attend her yielding. Where could she turn for support, for help to tread the rugged road of rectitude and self-mastery?

Cold thrills of dread and reluctance shivered through her as she recognised that safety lay in a course for which as yet she had not courage—to confess her existence openly; to implore her brother's help; to face the disapproval, probably the contempt, of his wife, the displeasure of Gribble, and trust to her own determination to escape the horror of being forced back to her husband.

It was a desperate remedy, and for the present quite beyond her strength; but the idea fixed itself in her mind as something possible. Later she would speak to Brian about it; she would do nothing without consulting him—he deserved all confidence from her.

The traces of this long mental struggle were

visible in her pale cheek and heavy eyes; and when Leigh looked in on Mrs. Griffith the next afternoon, ostensibly to tell her Frank had passed through town on his way to Ireland, really to see how Mildred was, he pencilled some words on a card and placed it before her: "You have broken your promise, and tormented yourself through a sleepless night."

Mildred smiled, glanced at him, and while Mrs. Griffith was declaring she did not want to know anything of Frank, and yet went on questioning Leigh about him, she wrote, "I could not help it; but I have exhausted my torments, and will rest to-night," beneath his lines.

Leigh read them, shook his head, and tore the card into minute scraps, which he placed in the waste-paper basket.

It was more than a fortnight after this warning before Lady Mary Dacre's threatened letter arrived. It was a clever and extremely judicious composition, and informed Mrs. Griffith that she was coming to England to pay various visits; that she would have her eldest daughter with her; that before beginning to fulfil the engagements she had undertaken from a sense of duty, she should like to refresh herself with a few quiet weeks at Pennogwen—that dear old place which was associated with her brightest recollections as the most incomparably delightful of country houses; and though circumstances had altered, "the scent of the roses hung round it still." Would dear Mrs. Griffith tell her frankly if her coming about the middle of June would be perfectly convenient?

"I am sure I shall be very happy to see Lady

Mary," interrupted Mrs. Griffith complacently. "She is an agreeable, well-bred woman. She used to be the life of our parties when I was capable of being a hostess. I wonder how old the daughter is—she must be seventeen. There were two or three boys first. Terrible business for the children when such ruin overtakes a father! Go on."

"'Poor Mr. Dacre has been a sad invalid all the winter. His medical attendant is at a loss to decide what is at the root of his sufferings; no doubt acute mental anxiety has greatly intensified his physical condition.'"

"Acute fiddlesticks!" again interrupted Mrs. Griffith. "Anthony Dacre would not care if the world was coming to an end, so long as he had a good dinner and a horse to ride!"

"Perhaps he has neither."

"I doubt that. Go on, Mrs. Wood."

"'I suppose there is some truth in the reports which reach me from Pau, that Colonel Griffith is to marry his cousin, Gwendoline Ferrers,'" resumed Mildred. "'It will, I am sure, be a great satisfaction to you. She is a charming girl, and has a large fortune.'"

"What!" cried Mrs. Griffith, sitting upright and grasping the arms of her chair; "Godfrey marry Gwen Ferrers? This is the most preposterous piece of gossip I ever heard in all my life! Why, he was never commonly civil to her! A satisfaction to me! As if Colonel Egerton Griffith could be satisfied with an unformed chit, an ill-mannered trifler, like Gwen! I hope a very different marriage may shortly be an-

nounced. You must write to Godfrey for me immediately, to warn him not to give any colour by his conduct to such absurd reports. I have no patience with people! Have you your writing materials? I will dictate a letter to Lady Mary at once, and deny the possibility of such a thing. She might have suited Frank; but Colonel Griffith—no, thank you!"

Mildred did not venture to make any remark. She wrote obediently to the blind lady's dictation a cordial invitation to Lady Mary, and an indignant denial of the report mentioned by her. A warning letter to Colonel Griffith followed, and then Mrs. Griffith declared herself unfit for anything but an airing; so the carriage was ordered, and Mildred was ordered to accompany her.

Seeing that these letters had agitated and annoyed her employer, Mildred postponed the announcement of her intention not to go to Pennogwen for a day or two, when an opportunity offered.

On returning from a drive, the butler presented a card inscribed "Miss Bent," with a message to the effect that Miss Bent would be a few weeks in town, should Mrs. Griffith wish to see her.

"See her! why should I wish to see her? Does she expect to take your place, Mrs. Wood?"

Mildred was silent till they were alone, and then, not without trepidation, began gently:

"Miss Bent made herself rather useful, I believe?"

"She was better than most of the incapables who have worried me. Why do you ask?"

"Because I am most reluctantly obliged to de-

cline accompanying you to Pennogwen. I shall probably be obliged to go abroad."

"This is most unexpected. What takes you abroad? If you knew this was hanging over you, why did you come back? You are behaving abominably," etc., etc., etc.

A very stormy altercation ensued—at least, on Mrs. Griffith's side. Mildred was deeply distressed. She knew she was useful to the irascible, headstrong woman, and she had grown to like her, to feel grateful for the recognition she always accorded her; but there was no choice: she must leave—she must be firm.

Mrs. Griffith grew indignant.

"There is something under this which I do not understand!" she exclaimed, at length. "You seem to have no reason to allege for your whimsical conduct, except that you *may* be obliged to go abroad. Pennogwen is as accessible by the post as London. You might stay with me until you are absolutely summoned, if you choose; but you do not choose, that is evident! Be so good as to write—'Mrs. Griffith's compliments to Miss Bent; she will be glad to see her to-morrow, between eleven and three.' There, you have the address; ring the bell; send that to the post instantly!"

Then, as soon as the footman retired, she went on:

"Now, Mrs. Wood, I shall trouble you no more. You may leave me. To-morrow I will send a cheque for what is due to you. I do not care to compel anyone to serve me against their will."

"I am exceedingly sorry to leave you, Mrs. Griffith. I think you will admit, on reflection, that you are

judging me harshly. I shall be most happy to serve you while you remain in town; but——"

"I am not in the habit of being dictated to. I wish you good-morning."

This sudden dismissal took Mildred's breath away. She wished she had not spoken so soon; but she had feared to let Mrs. Griffith lose the only person who seemed to suit her, and it was this consideration which urged her to avow her intentions. Where else could she find employment so suited to her peculiar position, and where, above all and every other consideration, she could see and communicate with Leigh.

She walked slowly back to Morton Street, venturing to make a detour by some of the more obscure streets, in order to collect and compose her ideas before giving an account of her dismissal to Mrs. Leavett.

Mildred waited patiently till Dick had retired, and his mother was free to enjoy a talk with her "niece" over the events of the day, which was her solace after "the shutters were up."

"Told you to go!" cried Mrs. Leavett, with uplifted hands. "Well, I never heard the like! She'll be ready to bite her tongue out to-morrow—mark my words! But you are quite right, Miss Milly—I mean, Mrs. Wood. Don't go nigh that outlandish place! Isn't it a mercy that you have that nice civil-spoken gentleman to keep you warned of the perils and dangers of this wicked world!" added Mrs. Leavett, jumbling up the Catechism and evening prayer in the earnestness of her thankfulness. "Don't have nothing more to do with the old lady; you are safer away."

"But I must earn some money, Koo! I must not spend the little I have."

"And you needn't! I don't want no rent—and an old song would pay for the trifle you eat and drink. I sometimes think you'd be as well out of London for a bit, and then, when they have all forgotten you, you might come back. I'll never like the house without you; and I wouldn't have my dear boy strong and well again, only for you."

Here the "gurl" brought a note, just received by the last delivery. Mildred opened it quickly. It was from Leigh, couched in the guarded phraseology he generally used when he did not give his letter into her own hand. After glancing at it, Mildred gave it to her old friend.

"DEAR MRS. WOOD,

"I am unexpectedly called away for two or three days. Until five o'clock on Friday next, address me at the Royal Hotel, Leeds. I hope on my return to have further information for you. May I call on Sunday afternoon?"

"What is he trying to find out, my dear?" asked Mrs. Leavett, looking over her spectacles.

"Oh! something more about Lady Mary, I suppose. I am not quite sure," returned Mildred absently.

Mrs. Leavett, seeing she did not care to speak, took her knitting.

The next afternoon, however, brought Davis, with an urgent message from Mrs. Griffith. She was nervous; she had a bad headache. Could Mrs. Wood

come over for an hour? She wished particularly to see her.

Mildred was quite ready to go, and found the blind lady partly penitent, partly querulous.

Miss Bent was so reprehensible as to have entered into a temporary engagement. Perhaps Mrs. Wood might find it convenient to go on with her duties as secretary until Mrs. Griffith went out of town?

To this Mildred agreed, and Mrs. Griffith was unusually amicable for several days.

The temptation to let Leigh call, as he proposed, was irresistible. She longed to hear his voice again; to tell him of her dismissal and reinstatement; to hear his report of his own proceedings; and also what he might suggest in lieu of Mrs. Griffith's engagement.

Mrs. Leavett, in the absence of the "gurl," admitted him herself—ushered him upstairs, joined in the conversation for a few minutes, and went away to prepare tea.

Then Leigh held out his hand for Mildred's, and indulged himself in a long, wistful look into her eyes. With a quick sigh he seemed to come back to the present, and releasing her hand, began to describe his visit to Leeds, and its object, which was to write a series of letters on the condition of trade and operatives. This would oblige him to be absent some days of each week, but he hoped to be in London on Saturdays and Sundays, and the address he had given would always find him.

Then Mildred gave an account of Mrs. Griffith's displeasure and its results, which seemed to amuse Leigh.

"I am very sorry for Mrs. Griffith," he said. "You will be a great loss to her, but you must not risk Pennogwen *this* year. Nor do I think the old place will see me. I am sorry for it; I always loved Pennogwen; I love it more than ever now! Do you remember the day I gave you a lesson in driving, and we went over to Llangwyddyr Abbey! Do you know, I could tell you nearly every word you said to me that day! I always look back to those weeks when I was Mrs. Griffith's only guest as to a spell of fairy-land, where *you* were the enchanted Princess, and myself anything but the fortunate Prince!"

"Yes, I remember it well," said Mildred softly.

"But I have a capital letter from Frank Griffith," resumed Leigh, after a pause rousing himself from contemplating the fire. "He is delighted with everything—thinks Lord Milford's estate capable of immense development—considers himself expecially fitted, by nature and grace, to be the agent of an absentee landlord, and is particularly delighted because his worthy principal proposes he should occupy the mansion, as the agent's residence is in a state of dilapidation, and must be put in thorough repair. He describes the aforesaid mansion as an ideal spot for a honeymoon, but, with extraordinary prudence, he intends spending a few weeks longer at Baronston, in order to inform himself thoroughly respecting his position and duties. Then hey! for London and the flinty hearted parent, and 'Haste to the Wedding!' Poor old boy! these hopes seem to make a new man of him. I really think he is the sort of fellow to deal with an Irish tenantry."

It is quite cheering to hear so good an account of

his prospects," said Mildred. "I always liked Mr. Griffith; he was my first friend in my new life."

"The last shall be first," returned Leigh significantly. And then he went on to talk of Irish affairs and politics generally, speaking frankly, earnestly, as to a second self.

The visit was altogether charming to Mildred. Leigh—save in a few irrepressible tones and looks—sunk the lover in the friend and sympathetic companion, and Mildred, lulled into tranquillity, dreamed for the moment that their intercourse might be ever peaceful and Platonic as it was then.

* * * * *

It was some little time after this conversation, and everything had gone on in the usual routine, Leigh having been greatly occupied and interested in the work he had undertaken, and which he had nearly completed.

The night had closed in, and, having dined alone in his chambers, Leigh sat smoking, and scribbling a long confidential letter to Mildred, such as he now and then indulged in. He had paused and was deep in thought, when an impatient knock announced a visitor, and Frank Griffith was ushered in. He was muffled in a loose rough overcoat, as if just arrived from a long journey, and looked haggard and anxious.

"Why, Frank! I thought you were safe in the backwoods of the sister isle!"

"So I was yesterday, at two o'clock. Give me something to eat and to drink, like a good fellow, and I will tell you my tale."

Leigh readily complied with this request. As soon

as Frank Griffith had refreshed himself, and was alone with his host, he drew his chair to the fire and began his tale.

"There's some infernal mischief going on—some plot against Dollie and myself. I haven't had a letter from her for weeks, and I was afraid of writing without instructions, as I might get her into a scrape. Yesterday morning, to my amazement, I had two letters from her: one a stiff formal affair, stating she thought it wiser that we should give up our engagement, which was so strongly disapproved by both our parents; that she would ever think of me with regard, but that all was over between us. The usual sort of thing. Here it is. There's not a word of her own in it. The other—look at the distracted writing!—*This* is from her poor little heart!"

Leigh read: "'Why have you not answered my last two letters? Perhaps you never had them! I am in terrible trouble, and fear no one can help me. But I must not seem false to you. I must explain things. If you care to know all, try and call upon me here on the 27th, before two o'clock. It is my only chance of being alone. I can scarcely write. My heart is breaking.'" This was dated several days back, and the address was in a western suburb.

"Startling, certainly," said Leigh, as he re-read the letter. "But nothing very tragic can happen nowadays. I suppose the cruel father is urging her to marry some one more to his taste than yourself."

"Probably. But that does not account for the despairing tone of her letter. I can't fancy why she thinks no one can help her. If the worst comes to the worst, she can run away with me. Besides, I am not such a

hopeless kind of *parti* now. I'm desperately puzzled. What pressure can the father have brought to bear on her? Dollie is a plucky little soul, but she is uncommonly fond of that old buffer, and rather disposed to sacrifice herself to him. There ought to be some limit to that kind of thing, you know."

"If it were not too conventionally dramatic, I should say the affair looks like selling her to save the father in some way; but that is not likely. He seems a thoroughly respectable old fellow."

"Oh, that is quite out of the question!"

The two men sat long in consultation, conjecturing and vainly puzzling their brains to no avail, till Frank, suddenly remembering that he might need a clear head and steady nerves next day, went off to rest, his rooms being close at hand.

Leigh added a few lines to his letter, and closed it, intending to pay his blind kinswoman a visit next morning, and give it to Mildred himself.

It was agreed that Leigh should be at home and alone the following afternoon to hear Frank's report of his interview, that they might concert what measures the case needed when it was fully known. While waiting for his friend, Leigh occasionally put down his pen, and thought how slight was any barrier compared to the bands of iron which separated him from Mildred. Yet their real strength lay in the aspect they wore to her. An unmarried girl! Why, what could keep her from her lover if she were willing to be his? But Frank delayed his coming, and Leigh had begun to feel uneasy. It was past four when he burst into the room, his pale face and air of agitation showing that he was

roused out of every remnant of the easy nonchalance which used to be his leading characteristic.

"You are a true prophet!" he exclaimed, throwing himself into a chair and his hat on the carpet. "It is a worse business than we expected—a desperate tangle. But I must—I will get her out of it!"

"Tell me as clearly as you can," said Leigh, turning to face him.

"Oh, my God, Brian!" exclaimed Frank; "my poor little darling is so changed—so unhinged and broken-hearted! I wanted her to come away with me then—on the instant; but she hadn't the courage—the will. What cobwebs women let themselves be bound with! But I'll save her yet. You have brains and invention—you'll help me?"

"Go on!" said Leigh.

"Here is the miserable story. It seems there is a rich fellow who took a great fancy to Dollie some time ago—since *I* came to the front; but Dollie gave him to understand that she was otherwise engaged. This fellow is a bill-discounter. Now, late last year, old Burton, who is on the Stock Exchange, saw a great chance of making a hit in some infernal transaction, to manage which he was short of funds, and in a moment of insanity forged Smiley's name to a bill at three months, fully expecting to be able to meet it. It seems Burton was with Smiley and Sharp—or rather, their predecessors—in old times, and has kept on very good terms with Smiley, who has put a good deal of business in his way. This bill was duly discounted by Dollie's persecutor; then Burton was obliged to ask for a renewal. Now this man threatens to expose everything, declaring he has only lately discovered it

was a forgery, and refuses every mode of settlement, except marriage with Dollie. Burton is nearly off his head, and has broken down completely. His abject entreaties have so worked on his daughter, that she has persuaded herself it is a sacred duty to marry this hoary elder—for both father and lover are a brace of whited sepulchres! I have exhausted myself in reasonings, prayers, expostulations. I have offered the money; but she implored me not to show myself in the matter—that it would finish her father (I wish it would!) if he thought I knew there was a blot on his character. She hung round me in her agony—by Jove! she, the daintiest, most stand-off little darling that ever existed! And the wedding-day is fixed—what do you think of that?—for this day week!"

"Quick work! What's the name of this bill-discounter?" asked Leigh, with a strange presentiment.

"Oh, he is no doubt what would be considered a good match—Welby, the new member for Middleborough."

"What!" cried Leigh, starting up; "the man whose wife was lost on the *Mer-de-glace* about two years ago?"

"Yes—I fancy it's the same."

"Then you must run away with your Dollie, or choke Welby, or—No, this cannot go on!" exclaimed Leigh with energy.

Frank looked at him, a good deal surprised.

"I was sure you would help me," he said, with his accustomed confidence in his cousin's superior resources. "What do you propose?"

But Leigh made no answer for some minutes. He stood still and silent on the hearthrug, thinking deeply,

vividly, of the effect this extraordinary turn of affairs would have on Mildred, and through her on himself.

This marriage must be stopped; but how, without betraying her? and would Welby not insist on the rights the law gave him, were it only to be revenged? It was a horrible position. The poor girl must at any cost be saved; but how?

Mildred was the only counsellor who could advise in such a tremendous difficulty. If Welby had only fancied some one else—some one, perhaps, to whom money and finery would have sufficed—why, his marriage might have removed one obstacle to Leigh's own union with Mildred.

Tolerably illegal ideas, he thought, with a grim inward smile, for a lawyer!

"Well?" said Frank at length, impatient at his long silence.

"My dear fellow, I can see nothing clearly at present. I have an idea; but I must mature it."

"There is no time to lose!" cried Frank despairingly.

"I know that; and if there is no other way to gain it, we'll kidnap Welby, even if we suffer an action for false imprisonment after. In this case I am prepared to do anything, however desperate."

"By Jove, Brian! you *are* a good fellow!"

"Have you managed to establish any means of communication with Miss Burton?"

"No—she is afraid."

"Ha! How is she situated? what does the household consist of?"

"It isn't a household; her aunt is in lodgings, and

went off this morning to take a boy of hers to school somewhere in the country."

"What can be done? Do they shop, or go to church, or——"

"The aunt takes her out; she is doing sheep-dog, I believe. I did ask how I could send a note; but it was no good—she said she would try and think and let me know."

"Then we can do nothing to-night. Let me see you early to-morrow. Come to breakfast—I may have hit on something by that time. I want to write a letter or two; then we'll dine at the club."

"Hang it, no! I couldn't stand the club. Come to my rooms; I'll let you off as soon as you like. Tell me—do you know anything against Welby?"

"I do, and I want to get permission to divulge it. But in any case I will use my knowledge to help you; give me till to-morrow morning. Do you know where the fellow hangs out?—I mean, where he has his office?"

"He hasn't one; but I once saw him coming out of Rigg's, the money-lender's."

"Ha! and he discounts bills! Perhaps he is the real money-lender."

"Quite possible," returned Frank.

The dinner was dull and silent. Frank was too disturbed and feverish to eat. Leigh, however, was made of different stuff; the strain of keen anxiety, the nearness of danger, of a crisis, roused his latent strength of nerve—the coolness and energy ever ready to grapple with difficulty.

"I must leave you presently," said Leigh, when the dinner was over. "What are *you* going to do with yourself?"

"I don't know; I should like to go and prowl about the house."

"Where Miss Burton is staying? You had better not be seen there. The father thinks you are in Ireland; don't put him on his guard."

"But I can't keep quiet!" said Frank disconsolately.

"At any rate, wait till the last post is in; you might have a letter from her."

"Yes—that's possible," a little more cheerfully.

Leigh went to the writing-table and wrote a line or two, which he put in an envelope, fastened it carefully, and put it in his pocket; then he nodded good-night to Frank, and went out.

CHAPTER IX.

MILDRED was busy writing a reply to Arthur's letter for Mrs. Leavett to copy. She had not been able to compose herself to this task before. It seemed so hard to write, even in Mrs. Leavett's name, when other and less friendly eyes than her brother's would scan the lines. She was interrupted by the little servant, who brought her a note.

"Any answer, 'm?"

Recognising the hand, Mildred hastily opened it, and read:

"I must see you at once—I have some startling intelligence."

"Is anyone waiting?"

"The gentleman, 'm."

"Show him up."

She hastily put her writing-things together, and stood up to receive him.

Leigh paused as he entered to look at her as the light fell on the glossy masses of her nut-brown hair, the pale, delicate oval of her face, her large, dark, alarmed eyes, the slender figure, whose tender grace no garment, however simple, could conceal, and felt, for one intense instant, that he could with his own hand destroy the life that animated her, before he would resign her to the dull brute whose claims it would be difficult to resist.

"And you have news for me?" she said, as he silently took the hand she held out. "Is it of Frank Griffith?"

"It is," said Leigh, recovering himself; "and something of a long story; are we safe from interruption?"

"Yes, it is only nine o'clock; Mrs. Leavett rarely comes up before ten."

Leigh drew a chair. Mildred resumed her seat, and gave deep attention to the story he proceeded to repeat.

He described clearly the entanglement of the forged bill, the hold this gave the bill-discounter on Burton, and through him on his daughter, reserving the disclosure of the most important item to the last.

"This is most painful!" exclaimed Mildred, as he paused. "It is a frightful position for Miss Burton! How can you or anyone help her?"

"Yet the marriage must be stopped," said Leigh; "for here is the most extraordinary part of the whole: the man who wishes to contract it is—Welby."

"Who?" said Mildred, shrinking back as if she had received a blow, her eyes fixed on Leigh with a look of fear.

"Your husband—Welby."

There was a moment's silence; then Mildred, clasping her hands and pressing them against her breast, exclaimed, in a low, solemn tone:

"God forgive me! I am the cause of this wrong!"

"You could not foresee such a complication. How were you to anticipate all the possible consequences of your act? Pray do not torment yourself with fruitless self-reproach."

"Fruitless!" repeated Mildred; "it must not be fruitless. Let me think."

She rose restlessly, and threw herself into a corner of the sofa, pressing one hand over her eyes. Leigh watched her with vague uneasiness. What was she revolving in her mind? He waited, but she did not speak; her bosom heaved, the hand that lay beside her opened and shut nervously.

"I was afraid you would be terribly disturbed," began Leigh.

"Hush!" she said. "I see plainly enough what I ought to do—shall I dare to do it?"

She left the sofa as she spoke, and came back to her seat by the table, taking up a pen which lay there, and drawing it through her closed hand over and over again.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Leigh, watching her eagerly.

"Of declaring myself to Mr. Welby: of facing all the consequences of such a declaration—except returning to my husband, which I am now sure he would not ask. How shall I find courage to do it?"

"It is too tremendous a risk!" exclaimed Leigh. "Confide in Frank, or even tell Burton; warn *them*, but do not put yourself in Welby's power. It is a tremendous dilemma; I don't know what to advise."

"No one can advise me," said Mildred, and she relapsed into silence, her eyes fixed, and gazing into some depths of her own soul; her expression growing settled, almost stern, as she thought. "I must—I will," she said at length, slowly. "I ought to put this matter right; I only can do it."

"How do you propose?"

"I will go and speak to Mr. Welby face to face."

"It is sheer madness!" cried Leigh, beginning to pace the room with agitation. "Could you not write the warning?—if it must be given—or why deal with him at all? Frank or I myself could assure Burton that the wife did not die. We could provide the money to take up the bill; though he threatens to betray the affair to Smiley, I don't for a moment doubt Welby might be bought off."

Mildred shook her head.

"I know him too well to believe it. My death is so undoubted. You would be compelled to give proofs of my existence. The more I think of it, the more convinced I am that the only plan to save both the girl and her father is to present myself to Mr. Welby, and that alone. I know his horror of scandal and notoriety; and I have a sort of hope that he would be glad to leave me undiscovered and hush up the whole affair. His resolution has a limit, and there is an abyss of cowardice beyond. All depends on my own courage and bearing. If he wishes to compel my return to him, he can only do so by the publicity of legal proceedings; and at all hazards it is only right for me to brave consequences. It grows clearer as I look at the question."

But Leigh still opposed the project, though feeling the weakness of his own arguments, the cowardliness of his counsel. At last he perceived that he could not move her, and he exclaimed:

"Suppose your anticipations of Welby's fears and scruples are wrong; suppose he calls on the law to secure him his undoubted right; what lengths would you go to escape?—for there *is* a way of escape."

Their eyes met, and Mildred grew first crimson and then deadly white, as she divined the drift of his question. She answered steadily:

"*That* I cannot foresee. We can only deal with the present."

There was a short silence, and Leigh said:

"How do you propose to approach him?"

"Ah! that is the first of many difficulties. I cannot go to his house: Jane—the servants might recognise me."

Leigh told her Frank Griffith's suspicion that Welby was the real money-lender whom Rigg of Ely Place masked.

"Ely Place!" returned Mildred. "Yes; I know he used to go there!"

After much discussion, it was decided that she should write a few lines, addressed to Welby, to the effect that the writer could give him some strange particulars respecting his late wife, if he would receive her on the following day. This was to be sent under cover to Rigg, and marked "private."

"He will recognise my writing," said Mildred, "and that will ensure his seeing me. I will give no address, and take my chance."

"Good God! and will you go alone?" cried Leigh flushing darkly red with the painful thoughts that would surge up.

"I must! it is my only chance. More than that—you must give me some money to offer him. The one thing he would dare everything for, is money. Do you know how much this bill amounted to?"

"Not certainly. Frank has a dim notion it was for £200. Probability is against its being more."

"That is a great deal of money! But I feel my courage growing. If—if—I can but succeed without too fearful results, this present danger may bring me greater safety than I dared to hope."

* * * * *

The effect of Mildred's bold resolution was almost paralyzing to Leigh. He was completely unhinged. Frank Griffith—deeply as he was preoccupied by his own troubles—could not help noticing his kinsman's uneasiness, more especially as Leigh could not or would not give him any distinct account of the measures to be taken. He could only beg him to wait with what patience he might for another day.

Perhaps Mildred felt the strain less terribly. She felt her own strength grow with the conviction that what she was about to do was just and right; that however she might be blamed, her life since she fled from her husband was free from stain; that she need not fear to meet her brother, or Mr. Gribble. Finally, she nerved herself to face all consequences, and trust the ends to Providence.

Still it was hard work to go through the routine of the day with Mrs. Griffith. That shrewd lady remarked more than once that Mrs. Wood was unusually distrait; but Mildred accounted for it by explaining that she had some important business to transact next day, for which Mrs. Griffith must kindly excuse her attendance. Mrs. Griffith grumbled a good deal, but acceded.

In the afternoon Leigh called, and gave her a roll of notes, with a few lines stating they were from Frank Griffith:

"I will call to-morrow, after seven, to know the result of your momentous interview. I suppose I must not venture before."

Mildred had found some support in Mrs. Leavett's warm sympathy. First she implored her dear young lady not to trust her head into the lion's mouth, then she begged and prayed to be allowed to accompany her; finally she succumbed to Mildred's fiat, and tried to content herself with preparing an extra good breakfast, which Mildred could not touch.

It was with something of the desperate courage which inspires the volunteer for a forlorn hope that she started on her great undertaking, wrapped in a long dark cloak and thick black veil, and after walking a little distance took a cab, in order to reach her destination between one and two, when most clerks are at their luncheon.

Near the Viaduct she dismissed the vehicle, and began to look for Ely Place, as she never had been there before. She soon discovered it, and the name of Rigg on the side of a door. The bell was answered by a boy.

"Mr. Rigg is not in," said he promptly.

"Ask the other gentleman if he will see me. Give him this."

This was a note inscribed "The writer of yesterday's letter." The boy departed into the private room. A murmur of voices came thence. Then he returned, took a card on which was printed, "Will be back in half an hour," caught up his hat, saying "You can go in;" pointed towards the open door, and proceeded to let himself out.

Mildred, mastering a wild temptation to rush from the place, walked into the room, and found herself face to face with her husband. Her first impression was that he seemed greatly changed. He was larger, heavier, duller-looking, flushed, and wearing an expression of uneasiness and positive alarm.

"Well, what may your wonderful disclosure be?" he exclaimed in a bullying tone, while he eyed the tall veiled woman before him with increasing dread. "I warn you I am not easily tricked, and will punish imposition severely. Who are you?"

"No impostor!" said Mildred, turning back her veil, and looking into his eyes.

Welby turned lividly white, and starting from his seat, shrunk back against the wall in abject terror.

"Mildred! Oh my God! what has brought you here?" he gasped, after staring at her in silence. "I never meant to harm you. Is it a clever trick?" trying to steady his trembling limbs by clutching the back of his chair. "Are you a living woman?"

"I am Mildred, and I am living!"

"Then what do you want with me?"

"I wish to save you from unconsciously committing a crime. You are about to marry. You must not."

"Is that what has brought you back? Then you are an impostor—an infamous impostor, whom I shall expose and punish as you deserve. Who will believe that you are or were my wife? I deny it. I don't recognise you. Who will believe you against me?"

Mildred smiled, and a feeling of relief strengthened her heart.

"I have not left myself without witnesses," she

said. "But I do not want to intrude on you. Give up this marriage, and you shall hear or see no more of me."

Welby continued to gaze on her with mingled fear and hatred.

"How was your worthless life saved? What misconduct has induced you to keep hidden all this time? I'll examine—I'll find out. I'll divorce you and disgrace you, and—and——" He stopped abruptly, his chest heaving, his eyes glaring.

"Do what you will," returned Mildred, growing steadier and more hopeful of success as she noticed his rage against her, his evident perplexity; "publicity has no terrors for me. I can account for every hour of my life since I vanished. There is no use in being angry. I am simply doing right in saving you from bigamy—from marrying a girl who accepts you only to preserve her father's character. I have nothing to fear; do your utmost. Your punishing me will not set you at liberty to contract another marriage."

Welby stared at her in a dazed, helpless way, and returned to his chair without speaking. At last he asked hoarsely:

"What made you go? Did that villain Gribble put you up to leave me?"

"Mr. Gribble? No! it was because he would not assist me to seek a separation that I took the law in my own hands—and left you."

She checked the words that were rushing to her lips. Better not express the detestation she felt; better say as little as possible.

"Ay! and now I suppose you want to come back to the comfortable home you left, and keep me from

making myself happy with a real good woman, who'll love me for my goodness to her father?"

"As *I* was to love you for your goodness to my mother!" returned Mildred, with a bitter smile. "I suppose you have enough legal knowledge to be aware that I can demand my place in your house? I have not yet been absent two years."

She was amazed at her own daring and resource. Instinct told her that Welby was quailing—that he had more to lose than she had.

"As I hope for salvation," he cried, "you shall never enter my house! What is it you want? Don't be a fool! If you force yourself back into notice, you will only bring down shame and disgrace on your head—well-deserved disgrace, you bold, bad woman! You——"

He stuttered and hesitated. Mildred looked at him unmoved, wondering she could have ever feared him or sought to waken better feeling in him.

"We are wasting time," he resumed, pulling himself together with an effort. "Tell me what you want. I don't wish to see a creature that has borne my name dragged through the mire of police reports. It's better for yourself to be dead and forgotten. You are out of sight—keep there. If you'll be quiet, and not interfere with me, I—I don't mind giving you a monthly allowance"—he grew greenly yellow as he spoke, feeling the risk he ran in making this proposal—"that shall cease directly you show yourself."

"How could you bind me?" said Mildred, with cold composure — composure that impressed Welby with a sense of hidden power. "I have nothing to lose."

"I will set detectives on your track," he burst out

again, losing his head. "There is some crime, some sinful secret in your life, for all these months. I'll find it out; I'll crush you."

"You can do what you think best for your own character and reputation."

Welby could hardly believe that this calm, stern woman was the weak, emotional creature he had trampled on and caressed alternately. He detested and feared her. Time was slipping away, Rigg might return. He would not for a large sum that Rigg got hold of such a story.

"Come, now," he resumed, "let us be reasonable. Tell me straight out what you want; I am prepared for a compromise."

Mildred drew a step nearer his writing-table, and said, in a low voice:

"Give up Miss Burton, return her father the bill you hold, and I will disappear out of the world, as far as you are concerned. I can earn my bread without your help."

"If you don't want me yourself, why do you want to deprive me of a wife—a wife who will atone to me for the injuries and misery you have caused?"

"Because she loves another man, and is giving him up to purchase your forbearance. How is it that you do not fear such a marriage—that you are not ashamed of taking so mean an advantage of a girl's loyalty to her father?"

"Mean! It is the best thing for her! When she has a real good husband, she will soon forget a whipper-snapper like that insolent jackanapes Griffith. Come now, why are you so keen to mar my wishes—my plans? Couldn't we arrange matters?"

He grinned a ghastly, satyr-like grin.

"Take care what you propose to me; it is war to the knife between us. I shall grasp every advantage over you."

"I can make no decision to-day," said Welby; "meet me to-morrow. We shall be interrupted; I expect Rigg every moment;" and he glanced at the clock.

"That does not concern me," returned Mildred, playing out her trump card with immense pluck. "I am quite ready to explain who I am to Mr. Rigg, or anyone else. Hear my final proposition, and choose between it or public avowal of my identity. Write a letter to Miss Burton, stating that you see what it costs her to renounce the man she loves—that you cannot insist on what may cause her unhappiness—that after a struggle you have resolved to set her entirely free, to which end you enclose the bill on Mr. Smiley, which you have hitherto held, and bid her farewell."

"How dare you suggest such robbery? It's downright robbery! Leave my sight—leave my room!"

"I will not, until you do what I ask."

"How do you know all this? Where have you got your infernal cunning? Has Miss Burton sent you?"

"Miss Burton does not dream I am in existence. I *know*—it does not concern you how I know. Come—what will you do?"

Welby hesitated. There was no trifling with this stern, composed woman. He had just surmounted the dangers of the petition against his return for Middleborough. A scandal such as the return of his wife from the grave, in order to preserve Burton's daughter from being victimized, would be ruinous; and Mildred was evidently desperate—she was ready to face any-

thing and everything. But to lose the pretty, graceful girl of whom he had made so sure—*and* his money—it was a bitter pill!

"If I agree, will you never molest me more? How can I be sure you will keep your promise?"

"I will promise, and you must trust me. If you do not, I will put my case in Mr. Smiley's hands before nightfall. My protectress and employer is his client—Mrs. Griffith, of Pennogwen."

Welby stared at her bewildered.

"And my money—am I to be plundered and cheated?"

"Write the letter, enclose the bill, and I will give you a hundred pounds."

"A hundred pounds! It is for two; and I only received a trifle of discount!"

"I promise you the remainder of your money in a few days; but you must give me the letter and the bill now."

The sound of an opening door made Welby start.

"Who is there? Is it you, Rigg?"

"Yes; do you want anything?"

"No—stay where you are; I am particularly engaged."

With a glance of concentrated fury he drew some paper to him and began to write. Mildred deliberately walked round and read the words he traced. He embodied what she had dictated in somewhat pompous language faithfully enough. Then he rose, unlocked a safe, and took out Burton's bill from a parcel of others, came back, and placed it and the letter in an envelope, which he addressed.

"Let me see the bill," said Mildred, taking it from

him, and reading it carefully. "I will take charge of these, and make sure they are delivered safely. You shall have the reply to-morrow."

She put the letter, still open, carefully in her note-book, and proceeded to count out five twenty-pound notes.

"You shall have the rest in a few days; nor shall you hear or see more of me, unless, indeed, you are about to contract another marriage."

She turned to leave him.

"Not yet!" said Welby, in an eager whisper. "What name do you go by? I hope you haven't the audacity to use mine!"

"I have no wish to do so; I call myself Mrs. Wood."

"Where and how do you live? I am determined to find out."

"I have no wish to conceal anything," returned Mildred, with the ease and composure which impressed him so much. "I am acting as secretary to Mrs. Griffith of Pennogwen; and I am living with my mother's former maid, Mrs. Leavett, until my brother returns from India."

"Your brother! Is that scamp alive?"

"He is alive and prosperous."

She was about to leave the room by the door through which she had entered.

"Stay! stay!" said Welby, in an eager whisper; "not that way—not that way!"

He hurried across the room to open the private door, of which he kept the key. He looked so limp, so beaten, so utterly unhinged, that Mildred felt an instant's pity.

"Remember, your reputation is saved," she said as she passed him.

"Remember, if I can ever pay you back for this day's work, I will!" he returned.

Mildred bowed, and the next moment she was in the open air, dizzy with the sense of relief, of success, of security.

Never did London streets seem so long, so crowded. Surely her driver was inexperienced, or he would not so often get into blocks! But at last she was at her journey's end.

The door safely closed upon her, she ran quickly upstairs, and in the drawing-room found Leigh and Mrs. Leavett in eager conversation.

"Oh, thank God, I am safe here at last!" cried Mildred, hastily putting off her bonnet and heavy veil, and throwing herself into a chair. "I am dizzy with my own success!"

"My lamb! you look like a ghost! You are just worn out!" exclaimed Mrs. Leavett.

"How have you escaped?" cried Leigh, starting to her side.

For a moment she could not speak; then, recovering herself, she recounted as shortly as possible the interview she had just had, and then placed Welby's letter in his hand.

"You have done splendidly!" he exclaimed, as he glanced over it. "Your anticipations have all proved correct."

"God be praised!" said Mrs. Leavett.

"I feel safer than I did. I felt safe comparatively from the moment you told me Mr. Welby wished to marry again; and the first gleam of dread and dis-

like I saw in his eyes was as welcome as the glance of affection from another."

"Do not feel yourself too safe," said Leigh. "Should Welby's disappointment and baffled schemes irritate him beyond the restraining dread of public disapprobation, he will try to revenge himself on you. Does he know where you are living, or what you are doing?"

"Yes; I told him both, and that I expected Arthur's return, at which he seemed stunned. I should never dream of concealing my abode from him. He will not seek to find me, you may be sure."

"No; it would be folly to hide anything now," said Leigh. "Your plan is to assume an attitude of tranquil security. I am disposed to think that, this storm over, Welby will be little inclined to rake up an old story."

"I think so too. But do not stay to discuss anything now. Do go away and tell poor Mr. Griffith, and have this letter given to Miss Burton. I feel so much for her. Oh, think of her state of mind with such a fearful prospect before her! I wonder she is alive. Do go. Don't forget some of you must pay that other hundred pounds."

"We shall take care of that," cried Leigh. "And now I shall be off to Frank, and rejoice his heart. But I must see you again this evening. There are a dozen matters to be talked over. May I not come this evening, Mrs. Wood?"

"Oh yes, yes! I too feel I must see you again, so come for this once. After! It is impossible to say what will happen after," cried Mildred.

"I'll look out for you about eight-thirty, and let you in myself, sir," said Mrs. Leavett.

"Then you must lie down and rest, Mrs. Wood. You need rest and quiet sorely." So saying, Leigh departed.

The necessity for self-control removed, Mildred yielded to the impulse which prompted her to throw her arms round Mrs. Leavett's neck, and relieve her overstrained heart by a burst of hysteric tears.

"Oh, Koo!" she exclaimed brokenly when her sobs ceased, "the sight of him, the sound of his voice brought back all the horror of my life with him—the desperate struggle to do my duty, the black despair; and now I do indeed feel free. He does not want me. He only wants to keep me buried out of sight. We shall never meet again—oh, I hope not! I may live on peacefully with you, dear Kooie!"

"It is a poor life for you, my lamb, and a sorrowful lot; but the one I am sorry for—ay, from my heart —is Mr. Leigh."

"Why?" asked Mildred, drawing back her head to look in Mrs. Leavett's face, while her own cheek grew crimson.

"Because he loves the ground you walk upon, and there is no hope or help for him."

CHAPTER X.

FRANK GRIFFITH paced the sitting-room of his chambers in almost intolerable anxiety and impatience. The day for which Leigh had stipulated was more than past, and he had made no sign.

There can scarce be a severer trial of faith than to wait the result of measures of whose nature one knows nothing, and of whose efficiency one is quite unable to judge. Indeed, there is a certain amount of humiliation in thus placing one's self in the hands of another, and giving up one's liberty of action even for a few hours.

Frank felt this keenly. In spite of his confidence in Leigh, he reproached himself for submitting to be led blindfold. But what could he do? Another precious day was more than half over, and he had accomplished nothing. What had become of Leigh? He had reached the limit of endurance and had taken up his hat, when the bell rang, and Leigh walked in.

"I thought you were never coming!" he exclaimed, almost wringing his friend's hand off. "Well, what news?"

"Good," said Leigh emphatically—"first-rate. In short, I have brought you deliverance out of all your troubles. The screw I was able to put on has been powerful enough to produce this;" and he handed him the letter Welby had written to Miss Burton.

Frank read it with delighted amazement, and examined the bill.

"It's all right," he exclaimed. "Why, how in the name of heaven have you managed it! It's like some of Lytton's mysterious strangers, who make everything smooth by magic. My dear fellow, you have restored me to life. Nothing I can ever do can repay the enormous benefit you have bestowed. Let us take this to my poor little Dollie at once. How shall we manage to put it into her hand safely?"

"Let us go straight away to her abode. I am not known to the dragons which guard the garden of Beauty. I shall therefore venture boldly in, and hand Miss Burton this precious missive. If there is any difficulty about seeing her, I shall boldly state that I come from Mr. Welby."

"But will you not give me a clue as to the benefactor to whom we owe this wonderful deliverance?"

"That you must not ask," said Leigh gravely. "In time you may know, and I rather think the day I can tell you will be a very happy day for me."

"The mystery grows deeper and deeper still!" cried Frank, who was wild with joy at the unexpected relief. "But come—we must not delay in conveying these joyful tidings to my precious little sweetheart! I am glad she'll be saved the trial of running away with me—for I never should have permitted her to be victimized—even if I rescued her by force."

"Better put a knife in her heart than let her fall into the hands of so unspeakable a brute as Welby!"

"Why, what the deuce has he done?" cried Frank, struck with the other's tone.

"It is no matter to you now. You have done with him. Let us lose no more time."

The friends were soon in a hansom, and on their way to Campden Hill, in which locality Miss Burton's aunt had fixed herself. After much consultation they decided that Leigh should present himself as a messenger from Mr. Welby, and not ask to see Miss Burton —only for a line, acknowledging receipt of letter—trusting the young lady to communicate the joyful news to Frank. Their difficulties were increased by the solemn promise he had given never to betray his knowledge of the forged signature to Burton himself—this indeed was necessary to the comfort of their future relations.

"Might I not put a pencil line inside, just to ask when I may call on her father?" asked Frank, as they dismissed the cab at some little distance from their destination. He was so overjoyed that his ideas were not very clear.

"No, certainly not! Don't you see you mustn't appear in it? Her father might be by when she opens the envelope, and that would spoil everything. No; you just wait in the tobacconist's there out of sight. I shall be back directly, and we can decide what to do after."

Frank confessed himself a blockhead, and obeyed orders.

When Leigh rang, and asked for Miss Burton, the servant replied:

"Yes, sir, Miss Burton is in, but she can't see anyone. She is very poorly, and hasn't left her room since the day before yesterday."

"Indeed!" cried Leigh, fearing fresh complications.

"Is she able to look at a letter? I am the bearer of one from Mr. Welby, and must ask for a receipt, if it were only a pencil line, from Miss Burton herself."

"From Mr. Welby?" repeated the girl, who evidently knew the name. "Oh dear, yes, sir; she read her letters this morning."

"Then be so good as to give her this;" and he gave the precious missive to the servant. "You will bring me back an acknowledgment at once."

"Yes, sir; won't you step into the back-parlour?"

"No, thank you!" returned Leigh, who preferred the obscurity of a dark passage.

The girl went quickly upstairs, and seemed a long time absent, though it was but a few minutes. At length a deliberate and rather heavy step was heard upon the stairs, and a stout, good-looking, well-dressed woman descended into the hall, holding a slip of paper.

"You are Mr. Welby's messenger?" she asked, trying to scan Leigh in the dim light.

He bowed.

"I am sorry my niece, Miss Burton, is quite unequal to write a reply. This is merely a receipt for the letter." And she handed him the paper, on which was written:

"Received a letter from Mr. Welby, this day, March 29. "D. BURTON."

Leigh folded it up, put it into his pocket-book; and again bowing, turned to go away. But the lady would not let him go so easily.

"Please say, Miss Burton will reply duly, but did not wait to read the letter just now. She was very

sorry not to be able to receive Mr. Welby yesterday; but she was really *very* unwell—a slight cold and feverish attack. Pray give my compliments—Mrs. Ashworth's compliments—and we hope Mr. Welby will call to-morrow."

Another silent bow.

"You'll not forget?" she began again, hoping to force him to speak. But a violent ringing attracted her attention. "Dear, dear! that is Miss Burton's bell. Good-day to you. Can you manage the door? Good-day."

"She has read the letter," thought Leigh as he descended the steps. "The spell works. Frank will have news of her to-morrow."

And he went back to report progress.

"Ill! Do you say she was ill?" cried Frank, as they walked down the street, while Leigh described his experiences. "By Jove! they are driving her into her grave with their infernal schemes. It's nothing serious, do you think, Brian?"

"Nothing, I suspect, that such a remedy as I brought will not effectually cure. What do you bet you'll not have a few lines by the first post to-morrow?"

"I scarcely hope it—but I'll risk a letter myself to-night, if you'll address it for me."

"All right! only do not mention this business of Welby's. Keep on the sure side until you have made all square with old Burton."

* * * * *

When Leigh reached Morton Street a little after the time appointed, Mildred was utterly worn out, and calm with the stillness of exhaustion. She did not attempt to rise from her seat—stretching out her hand

silently to Leigh, who was infinitely touched by her pallor, and by the languid grace of her attitude.

"You are frightfully done up, I see!" he exclaimed.

"'Deed she is, sir!" said Mrs. Leavett, who had shown him up, and naturally followed to hear what further intelligence he had brought, "and no wonder! It has been an awful day for her."

"How have you succeeded?" asked Mildred.

"The success has been yours—ours the mere detail; but this, too, has been accomplished. I assumed the honourable office of Mr. Welby's messenger, and conveyed the precious reprieve safely to Miss Burton this afternoon. Poor Frank had a few incoherent rapturous lines from her just before I started to come here. You have made two, perhaps I might say three, people very happy by your resolute courage, Mrs. Wood. Frank intends, to-morrow, to go and consult with his *fiancée*, as to how he shall best approach her father."

"The poor dear young lady!" cried the sympathizing Mrs. Leavett. "It would have been a cruel shame to let her fall into the hands of a monster like that Welby!"

"How did you manage to communicate with Miss Burton? I thought she was carefully watched," said Mildred.

"She is," returned Leigh; and proceeded to describe his interview with the aunt.

"I suppose there will now be no obstacle to Mr. Griffith's marriage," said Mildred.

"I should think not. Frank is burning to have the knot securely tied. The poor little girl's note was

quite touching—Frank let me read it. Her thankfulness for her father's escape (the poltroon who would have sold her to infamous slavery!), her eloquent acknowledgment of Mr. Welby's noble conduct in giving her up, the overflowing gladness of the whole effusion, showed the state of bewildering joy in which she wrote. The note had been scribbled in haste, and despatched without a stamp. I trust in heaven you have not run too great a risk by throwing yourself so gallantly into the breach!" continued Leigh, looking earnestly, anxiously at Mildred.

"I don't think I have," she replied.

And the conversation turned on the new aspect which her interview that morning had given to her affairs.

"I feel sure that Mr. Welby's sole wish now is to keep me out of sight. If I do not demand money, he will never seek to disturb me. I am glad to have my mind set at rest on that point."

"It is a mercy!" said Mrs. Leavett. "But it shows how much he cared about you."

"Nature did not supply him with an overflow of affection," replied Mildred, smiling. "What he possesses is absorbed by self."

"Still, I fear he may at some time molest you!" cried Leigh.

"I do not think so. I think, as time goes on, and he is not disturbed, he will again forget my existence. Still, I should like to go away out of reach for awhile; but at present I can think of nothing."

"Where would you be so safe and well as with me, my dear young lady?" cried Mrs. Leavett.

"I can return to you, dear Koo!"

Seeing that Mildred was indisposed to talk, and with the tact of a good heart, Mrs. Leavett said something about being absent from the shop, and left the room.

There was a pause. Leigh stood for a minute or two on the hearthrug, full to the lips with ardent thoughts, yet hesitating how to express himself. His heart ached with longing to pour out loving, consoling words to that pale, quiet, wearied woman, who seemed so ill-fitted to bear the burthen and heat of the day, as she languidly leant against the side of her chair, her hands clasped and resting on her knee.

"I think they will be very happy," she said softly. "I don't think that he will regret what he has done."

"You mean Frank?" asked Leigh, drawing a seat near, so that he could see her face and figure. "No; he is a good, true-hearted fellow. He will be quite happy in a quiet country life with the wife of his choice."

"Perhaps; marriage is a more dangerous experiment for an ambitious man."

Another pause.

"This day's work has made a great change to you," said Leigh, in a low tone, resting his arms on his knees and leaning forward. "You have come back in a way to your old life; you have slipped on the manacles again."

"In one sense I have, but I fear detection less. I feel sure Mr. Welby will never want me to return; that makes me more at rest."

She sighed deeply.

"Yet you are less free! I feel keenly, painfully,

there is an additional barrier between us, through which, for your sake, I must not attempt to break."

"You are right," said Mildred, with more animation than she had hitherto shown. "I—we must be most guarded. It is impossible to say what Mr. Welby might do if he found the smallest excuse for attacking me—and——"

She stopped.

"And that means I must not venture to come here—to talk with you in private—to enjoy any of those rare moments for which I have only existed of late?"

"It does. For a long time to come I must make it impossible for Mr. Welby to discover anything that could be twisted into evidence against me. You see this yourself?"

"I do; and you shall find that I can be careful and self-denying. If by any amount of self-sacrifice I can help you and render your life less hard, do not doubt my readiness to make it. But I may always write to you? and I can at least see you at Mrs. Griffith's till she goes out of town. For God's sake do not break with her till the last moment. If you were not in London, we might sometimes meet."

"Listen to me!" exclaimed Mildred. "I have thought of you so much all day, and I see so distinctly what is best and wisest for us both, that I must speak frankly. The attempt to carry on the—the friendship——"

She hesitated.

"Yes—let us say friendship," said Leigh, with a caressing smile.

"The friendship which has sprung up between us,"

she resumed, "is worse than useless. It is dangerous for me—it is injurious to you: it makes you restless and unhappy just now. Later, when—when you will inevitably weary of the vague, undefined tie to so impersonal a person as myself, your sense of honour—the loyalty which I think is in your nature—will keep you hampered—Oh, let me finish! My courage is all on the surface to-day; and I don't want to spoil your life. There is a successful career before you—a useful one. You have done me great service; for the future I must do without your help—indeed, I think I can. Let me go; put me out of your mind—your life. My peculiar position—my strange story—has fascinated you; now you must look on it as—I will not say a *bad* dream"—and she raised her eyes to his with a smile—a smile playful, bright, infinitely sweet, Leigh thought—"but a dream. Years hence you can write a thrilling story about me; and people will say, 'How improbable! how sensational! What pandering to an unhealthy taste for excitement!' and you will go on and prosper as you ought to do, without any corner in your history that needs a veil. This would give me infinite pleasure——"

She stopped abruptly, for she felt she could not keep her voice steady.

Leigh's eyes had dwelt on her while she spoke, as if he would read her heart.

"Did any man ever give up a woman for her asking, as you do?" he said very quietly. "I certainly am not that exceptional man. To put you out of my mind, is what I neither can or will do. My tie to you—if you will admit one—can in no way interfere with my success—my ambition. Social standing has nothing

to do with it. The men with whom I work don't care where I live, or how I live, or with whom I live, so long as I don't fail in my engagements, and am at hand when I am wanted. What does the public—my paymaster—care for the private life of its servants? Your logic, your lecture, are both thrown away. Do not waste the precious moments of our last interview, for some time to come, in such unavailing arguments. You may not wish to be hampered by *me*, with that I have no right to quarrel; but as regards myself, you cannot undo what you have unconsciously done. You have no power to set me free."

Mildred did not speak. She was trying not to see, not to respond to the fascination of his eyes, his voice; she was trembling at the intensity of her love for this man, who had given himself to her so utterly.

"I will be prudent, careful as you like, and even the idea of your loneliness, your unhappiness——"

"I am not going to be unhappy," interrupted Mildred, with a sudden flash of spirit. "I am tired of being unhappy—it is dreadful! my soul rebels against the spell of misery that has so long crushed me! I have never willingly given mortal pain. I know I am full of imperfections, but I *have* tried to be good, and now I will see if I cannot cheat destiny a little. I am young, I am well; surely the long, long years before me will have some joy! I am not weighed down with a sense of wrong-doing—though I have done wrong. So do not fret yourself, dear Brian" (she was unconscious of using his name), "for me. I will try to hope, to work, to find pleasure, and I shall succeed. Do not sacrifice yourself for me; there are, there must be better days to come—don't you think so?" wistfully.

"I think," returned Leigh still quietly, though his eyes burned—"I think you are the sweetest, bravest, dearest woman that ever enthralled a man's heart! I love you, Mildred, better than I thought it was in me to love; well enough to master impatience and passion, to wait for you and serve you as a friend, a brother, until, by your own free will, by some blessed change of circumstances, we can be all in all to each other. My God!" he exclaimed as if to himself, as he rose and walked to and fro, "will that day ever come!"

Mildred, faint and dizzy with the emotion his words roused, buried her face in her hands, and kept silence.

"Now," said Leigh, resuming his seat, "you will say no more about the impossible. I have relieved my heart by showing it to you, and from henceforth I will not add to your troubles by any imprudence of speech or action. You shall see if I do not deserve your confidence, your belief in my loyalty."

There was a short pause, and Leigh, with wonderful composure, began to speak of Mrs. Griffith, of the prudence of remaining with her as long as possible, not only for financial reasons, and for congenial occupation, but because of the opportunity thus afforded to Leigh of keeping Mildred informed of what passed without, as he undertook to ascertain what Welby was doing—if he took any steps to watch or molest his wife. Then Mildred, growing calmer, expressed a desire to leave England, to find some employment beyond Welby's reach, on the Continent.

"Beyond his ken, not beyond his reach," said Leigh. "No spot on the globe is beyond the reach of a rich, vindictive man; but you might give him the

slip. However, the Continent is out of the question for the present; things look threatening. We shall know more by the time Mrs. Griffith leaves town, and you can arrange your plans accordingly. Your life here must be intolerable; we must endeavour to secure you a little brightness. I will keep you informed of what goes on—of Frank and his proceedings. I wish you could know the future Mrs. Frank; but of course it must be many a day before they know you saved her."

"If they ever do," said Mildred, with a sigh.

A little more talk of Mildred's extraordinary interview with her husband, of the change she saw in him, of his fear and anger, and Leigh, looking at Mrs. Leavett's chief ornament, a pretty clock, exclaimed:

"I dare not stay any longer. Good-night. I shall see you for a few minutes to-morrow."

"Not to-morrow. I could not go to Mrs. Griffith's to-morrow. I will take one day of rest, of reflection, and then I will go forward with fresh resolution."

"You must sorely need a day's quiet. You understand, then, that whatever you require or wish, you are to ask me, and I will do my best, as becomes your faithful friend," said Leigh very gently.

"I do—I do indeed." Her voice trembled.

"Good-night, then," said Leigh steadily, and turned to go; but Mildred could not keep silence.

"Brian!" He came back quickly. "Oh, I must tell you how grateful I am!" she cried, stretching out her hands to him. "How your goodness touches and comforts me as nothing else could do! You are very, very good!"

Leigh did not speak. He took and tenderly kissed

her hands over and over again. He gazed into her eyes and smiled, then left her without a word.

* * * * *

"So, Mrs. Wood, your business extended over two days!" cried Mrs. Griffith when Mildred next made her appearance in Eccleston Square.

"My business and its consequences," said Mildred. "I was fatigued and upset, so I took yesterday to rest."

"Yes," returned Mrs. Griffith blandly. "Widows generally have a great deal of worry with their affairs. I suppose the late Mr. Wood did not leave you too well off, or I should not have you for a secretary?"

"No; I got nothing from my husband."

"Very reprehensible indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Griffith—"after inducing a young woman of a higher position than himself to take him for better for worse (don't attempt to disclaim)—I know you are or were in a *much* higher position than your husband's aunt. It is evident in every word you utter, and I have no doubt in every movement."

"If goodness were a patent of nobility, my aunt——" began Mildred.

"But it is not!" cried Mrs. Griffith. "A *soupçon* of wickedness, a little dash of imperious devilry is essential to the picture of a great nobleman or woman. If you have no money, Mrs. Wood, why do you reject my offer of an increased salary to come out of town with me?"

"Only because I might be called away, and obliged to inconvenience you. Besides, I am not penniless, Mrs. Griffith."

"I am glad to hear it. I suppose you had some

money of your own. It is fortunate that worthless husband of yours did not make away with it."

"Why do you suppose he was worthless, Mrs. Griffith? Because he did not leave me a fortune?"

"Oh, if you are going to be sentimental, we had better have the paper."

"I think it would be better," returned Mildred, and took up the *Times*.

It was late in the afternoon before Leigh made his appearance, and Mildred was almost ashamed of the joy which she knew lit up her eyes as he came in. He talked pleasantly for a while with Mrs. Griffith, and mentioned having had a letter from Lady Mary Dacre, in which she said she feared not being able to start for England before the second week in June.

"Then I shall not leave town till the twelfth," said Mrs. Griffith. "I only want to be settled at Pennogwen in time to receive her." Leigh and Mildred exchanged glances, and he drew a morsel of paper to him on which he began to write. "Did she ever mention a ridiculous report to you?" continued the blind lady—"a report that Godfrey was going to marry Gwen Ferrers?"

"No, she has not. I cannot fancy anything more unlikely."

"Nor I. But unlikely things are always happening."

While she spoke Leigh handed what he had written across to Mildred, and she read:

"I have nothing important to report to-day, but shall to-morrow. Glad to see you looking brighter."

Mildred smiled to him, and tore the paper into tiny shreds.

Meantime, Mrs. Griffith was asking:

"What keeps Godfrey wasting his time in Paris? I wish he were well married to some ambitious woman, who would urge him on."

"I don't think any woman would have much influence with Godfrey," said Leigh.

"Yes," said Mrs. Griffith sharply, "a bad woman would—or one he was very proud of."

"A curious classification. Talking of marriages, I see Miss Vernon is to be married to young Redmayne, one of the attachés to our embassy at Berlin; he was at Pau for his health, and——"

"Redmayne! Not a son of Clavering Redmayne?" exclaimed Mrs. Griffith, in a sort of horrified shriek.

"Yes; his third son."

"Why, he hasn't a sou!—he hasn't a position! Good heavens! What is Lord Vernon thinking about? —is the man sane?"

"I hope so," said Leigh, laughing. "Redmayne is a nice fellow, good-looking, intelligent, a gentleman; and Miss Vernon has money and rank for both."

"Brian, you are a hopeless leveller!" said Mrs. Griffith. "I am disappointed at this. I expected better things from Lord Vernon. I thought he would have known what was due to his position, and to his daughter." There was a moment's silence, and then Mrs. Griffith resumed: "Have all the party from Pau been staying in Paris?"

"They have. There has been a good deal going on at the Tuileries, and I suppose Gwendoline enjoyed it."

"She enjoys glare and noise everywhere. Are you going, Brian? Shall I see you to-morrow?"

"Yes, certainly; about this time."

As soon as they were alone, Mildred resumed her reading; but she could see the blind lady's attention wandered. Presently Mrs. Griffith asked if she could spend the evening with her. She said she felt low and feverish.

Mildred readily complied, but begged the friendly Davis to let Mrs. Leavett know that she was not to return till late. She knew her faithful friend would imagine all possible horrors if her absence was not accounted for.

Mrs. Griffith was unusually talkative, but in a depressed and querulous fashion; and Mildred was not sorry when the evening was over.

Next day there were a number of letters to be answered, some of the replies requiring to be copied, so that time went quickly; and Mildred had scarcely begun to expect Leigh, when he came in.

As soon as he had exchanged greetings with his kinswoman, he said:

"I have a letter for you, Mrs. Griffith, which, if Mrs. Wood will excuse me, I must read to you only."

"Certainly!" said Mildred, rising.

Leigh opened the door for her, and, as she passed, put an envelope addressed to herself into her hand.

As soon as she had closed the library-door, Mildred eagerly opened her letter. It was full of Frank Griffith's affairs. He was in the seventh heaven of delight after his escape from the sea of difficulties in which he had been engulfed. He had had the fullest explanation with his *fiancée*, and that morning he had "interviewed" Mr. Burton, who was a good deal broken by the anxiety he had suffered, but tried to be as

pompous as ever. All agreed that the marriage must take place as soon as possible, especially as Lord Milford was anxious to have his agent "in residence."

"My task to-day is a delicate one," the letter went on to say. "I am the bearer of a letter from Frank, in which he announces the date of his marriage to his mother, and expresses his deep regret that he cannot have her presence or her approval. He urges his right of choice, and that he never would expect her to contribute to the maintenance of a son who goes against her wishes; but that he hopes the day may come when she will receive him and his wife. A good letter, firm and conciliatory; but it will be quite fruitless. I shall have a bad quarter of an hour; but I will try to have a word with you before I go. You will be sure to let me know if Welby makes any sign. I scarcely hope he will leave you unmolested."

Mildred had time to read this twice over, and meditate upon it, before Leigh came in.

"I have but a moment!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Griffith wants you."

"And what does she say?" asked Mildred, putting her letter carefully in her pocket.

"As I supposed, she is immovable. I am sorry for her. Her opposition is natural; yet a man cannot be expected to give up his highest right in deference to a mother's prejudice. Except in social position, Miss Burton is Frank's equal."

"The exception is all-important, however," said Mildred. "Is any day fixed for the wedding?"

"Yes—the twenty-ninth."

"I am glad they will have it over before May," said Mildred, smiling. "I had better go to Mrs. Griffith now."

"Tell me," cried Leigh, delaying her, "are you recovered somewhat from the terrible strain of those trying days? You look better—brighter."

"I am," she returned, "and I am endeavouring to hope, and to be happy; for, come what may, I have escaped."

A silent shake of the hand, and they parted.

CHAPTER XI.

After this unexpected and most dramatic break in the suppression and monotony of Mildred's life, all things resumed their former course. Mrs. Griffith grew more confidential. She often spoke bitterly of Frank's marriage, and foretold the many evils and miseries which would arise from it, in addition to the weight of her displeasure; and she again attempted to move Mildred from her decision not to go to Pennogwen, but in vain.

Leigh wrote frequently. He described the quiet, happy wedding of Frank Griffith and his beloved, and the departure of the happy pair for their new home. He kept her informed of his own doings, and often touched on politics—especially foreign politics. He recommended books for her perusal, and sent them; he soothed and strengthened her with the sense of constant loving care.

It was little more than a week after Frank Griffith's wedding, and Mildred had come in somewhat later than usual.

She entered through the shop, saying in a low voice, as she passed Mrs. Leavett:

"Can you come and speak to me for a few minutes?"

Mrs. Leavett, struck by something in Mildred's expression—something startled and uneasy—followed her immediately into the parlour behind the shop.

"What is it, my dear?"

"Auntie! I have been followed! I thought I had been once before—I am sure of it now. Once—oh! some time ago—I noticed a man—a respectably dressed man, with a book under his arm like a tax-collector—walking past Mrs. Griffith's house as I came out, in an opposite direction to the way I was going. I happened to look back as I turned the corner of the square, and he was a little way behind me. I did not think anything of the occurrence, yet it remained in my memory. Again, one morning, I recognised the same man, as I was going to Eccleston Square. I met him by the crossing near the church, and he looked at me from under his umbrella (it was that wet day last week). This evening I had just reached the corner of Gloucester Street, close to this, when I remembered I had left my work-basket—and I particularly wanted to finish that piece of embroidery to-night. So I turned sharply round, and nearly ran into his arms. It was always the same man—a simple, respectable-looking person, with rusty red whiskers, and altogether like Wilson, the gardener at Oakdale; only this man had a sort of lump or wart on one side of his nose. I felt

startled and angry, but I went back and got the basket. I did not see him again."

"My goodness!" cried Mrs. Leavett. "It's that Welby as is spying on you! Isn't it a mercy Mr. Leigh never came next or nigh the place since the day you saw that villain! What shall you do, my dear?"

"Do! nothing. Let them spy as much as they like, there is nothing to discover. Still, it is not pleasant, the idea of being dogged."

"It's an infamous shame!" cried Mrs. Leavett indignantly. "Why should quiet inoffensive people be harried and hunted with these slimy serpents of detectives? You'll tell Mr. Leigh, won't you, Miss Milly?"

"Of course I shall. But the thing is inexplicable. I am almost certain Mr. Welby does not want to see or hear anything more of me. Why does he set spies upon me?"

"Ah, he would just give his eyes to catch you tripping. Well, he'll get tired of watching, for it will cost him a fortune. I can't stop, Mrs. Wood, my dear; but I will get away early to-night. And you write to Mr. Leigh."

This Mildred did without loss of time, giving a full and accurate description of the man who had followed her, but adding that she determined still to be of good courage, as there was nothing to be discovered, and that she felt Mr. Welby was more afraid of her reappearing and demanding restitution of her rights than she was of being compelled to return to him.

Leigh was at his usual morning's work when the post brought him this letter. He was by no means so surprised as Mildred thought he would be. He had

anticipated some such move on Welby's part, as his object would of course be to acquire some such information as would give him a weapon of defence, or rather a counterbalance against the power to injure which Mildred's mere existence gave her.

It was well that she took so rational a view of the occurrence, but it was infernally annoying. Everything had been so quiet, there was so little apparent cause for uneasiness, that Leigh had begun to think he might dare to propose a visit to Morton Street some evening soon. He did not ask much—only to hear her voice, to read her thoughts, as much from her eyes as from her words; to gather delicious inferences from the sudden expressive silence, the quick softly breathed sigh; to touch her hand, to see her brighten in discussion, and enjoy the bracing pleasure of argument. For Mildred was no mere echo. She had spirit, ideas, an unaffected interest in the life around her. She was earnest to support her own opinions, frank in her readiness to admit mistake. What a glorious gift the love, the companionship of such a woman! But for the Burton complication, might she not have been his companion and no one have been the worse? Leigh was resolute and tenacious of will. Existing laws and customs were deserving of all respect and not to be lightly broken; but his Liberalism was of an advanced order, and his idea of such laws was, that, like the Sabbath, they were made for man, not man for them—that such a case as Mildred's was exceptional. Yet he would not have bought the delight he longed for at the price of an innocent girl's destruction. No; he must be content with things as they were *for the present*, and be man enough to bear up bravely, not to

add in any way to the heavy load laid upon the woman he loved so well.

He must then renounce any hope of seeing her save in the presence of Mrs. Griffith. This was something. But from this in a few short weeks, when the blind lady went to her country seat, he would also be cut off. Perhaps by that time light would come. He wrote at some length to Mildred, applauding her resolution to keep calm and unmoved, and stating his conviction that Welby's object was to discover some flaw in her armour which might put him in a better position, and perhaps enable him to dictate his own terms.

Beyond this, he sought a man of great experience, well known to a friend he could trust, and started an opposition detective, whom he set to spy upon the other, and quietly awaited the result. Meantime, Mildred, strengthened in her own opinion by Leigh's letter, made no change in her manner of life, even going out oftener in the lengthening evenings for air and exercise; but never alone—generally escorted by her aide-de-camp, Dick, sometimes Mrs. Leavett herself.

She rarely caught sight of anyone whom she could fancy was watching or following her; yet the sense of espionage always oppressed her and made her uneasy.

Mrs. Griffith, meantime, had grown less sociable, less interested in gossip than formerly. She denied herself more frequently to visitors than she used, and was in many ways changed since the previous year. Frank's marriage had been a great blow, yet a worse one awaited her.

Towards the middle of May, among the letters which awaited her coming to be read and replied to,

was one from Colonel Griffith, in which he shortly and decidedly announced his engagement to Miss Ferrers, and his intention to marry as soon as circumstances permitted.

"I am glad to think," he continued, "that this is an alliance which must meet your approval, as Gwendoline is a lady of our own blood, and wealthy —in every way different from the miserable marriage Frank has thought well to contract. We hope to be in London in a week or two, when I trust you will give Gwendoline the reception she deserves. She is quite aware of my financial position, and willing to set me straight without troubling you, which is in itself, as I am sure you will admit, a strong claim on *your* consideration, as well as my gratitude."

There was profound silence for some moments when Mildred ceased reading. Then Mrs. Griffith said quietly, but with inexpressible bitterness:

"This is the finishing-stroke. Such a marriage consigns Godfrey to obscurity and idleness for the rest of his days! Why did he not come to me? He has sold himself to pay his debts! Gwendoline Ferrers! Why, she is mad to fix on my son for a husband! He does not even like her; she will exasperate him, and he will ill-treat her; he will make her miserable. He wanted a strong, proud, dignified woman who would rouse him, and make him worthy of his station. Life is all vanity—worse, it is dust and ashes. What have I to live for now?" She made a slight gesture with her small, still beautiful hands, expressive of despair, and leant back, as though giving up the battle.

Mildred was deeply touched. This desolate old

woman had indeed built up her existence with the dust of pride, the ashes of ambition, rejecting the cement of human affection, which alone can give solidity to the edifice; and now everything was crumbling away.

She ventured to address some words of palliation.

"Miss Ferrers is very pretty, and must have a good deal of attraction. Then she is fond of Colonel Griffith, she is well-born, and wealthy."

"Well-born on one side only. She will always be a nonentity. Do not speak to me on the subject. I will struggle no more. I must let everything go. I cannot write congratulations. I will wait—I will get Brian Leigh to write for me. He ought to be here to-day; he was not here yesterday, but he is more settled than he used to be; I never knew him stay so long in England. What o'clock is it? The carriage ought to be here. Let us go out."

* * * * *

This projected marriage of her eldest son seemed more than Mrs. Griffith could bear. She grew silent and depressed, with occasional outbursts of irritability and querulousness. There was, in truth, nothing to complain of in her son's choice. Miss Ferrers would be a welcome addition to the best families in England. She was not too nearly related to her intended to rouse any objections to consanguinity, and her fortune was large. Mrs. Griffith was therefore obliged to be silent, more especially as she feared to betray the secret of her bitter disappointment—namely, that her son had lost the Vernon heiress.

The consequence of her present mood was to make her exceedingly exacting, and she scarcely let

Mildred leave her side. Yet, amid her vexation and harshness, she never failed to show occasional gleams of kindness to her secretary.

"I am quite distressed about Mrs. Griffith," said Mildred to Leigh, one afternoon when he had the great good fortune to find her alone, Mrs. Griffith having taken a certain elderly and impecunious spinster of high degree to drive with her in Mildred's place.

"She seems dull, and looks ill," he returned.

"I am quite sorry I cannot go to Pennogwen with her," she continued. "I feel that she likes to have me with her."

"And I am infinitely sorry you cannot," he said. "Apart from the joy of being able to see you there, I should know that you were safe from any annoyance by Welby. This is a precious chance," he went on, drawing a chair near her; "I had written what I have to tell, but it is infinitely better to speak. After thinking things over, I decided to set a thief to catch a thief; so I sent for a man I know who fights for his own hand, and is unconnected with any office—and put him on the track of Welby's spy. Don't look startled. I told him very little—only that a lady was annoyed by being followed and watched, and that we suspected Welby was the instigator. Last night my *employé* paid me a visit, and told me he was acquainted with the man you described, and that he had gathered from him that Welby put on the fellow to 'shadow' you, as the Americans say, more than a month ago, the object being to ascertain who visited at your residence, where you went, and, as far as possible, what you did. This has, of course, been fruitless. The detective himself told Morse—my man

—that Welby is furious at having to pay largely for nothing, and he thinks it likely he will soon be dismissed."

"It is very horrible to feel one is watched," said Mildred.

"It is; and it is infinitely trying to be debarred from even a rare visit. Apart from any other inducement, I ought, as your only outside friend and adviser (all I claim to be at present)," he added, with a quick, sweet smile—"I ought to have access to you. When this interdict is lifted you *must* let me come; for Mrs. Griffith gone, I shall never see you. Do you understand how intolerable existence is to me when I don't see you?"

He took up a skein of the silk with which she was working, and began to pull the threads asunder, and put it into a hopeless tangle. There was a moment's silence; then Mildred asked:

"What news have you of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Griffith?"

"Oh, all that is blissful! It really does one good to hear of two people being thoroughly and completely happy. By the way, I heard a few days ago that old Burton had made a great hit—a sudden rise in Egyptians has enabled him to clear a large sum; but I suppose he will soon lose it again."

"It would be strange if he ultimately turned out a rich man."

"Very improbable. Tell me—what shall you do when Mrs. Griffith goes out of town? You will be awfully, deplorably dull."

"Let us leave to-morrow to take care of itself; it

may bring good—it may even bring joy. Why should it always hide sorrow behind its curtain?"

"I wish I could be as hopeful as you are!" returned Leigh; and then at Mildred's request he left her, before Mrs. Griffith should return.

"My dear," said Mrs. Leavett, opening the door for Mildred a few evenings after this conversation, "there's a letter for you; it is on the drawing-room table."

"A letter for me!" exclaimed Mildred, greatly startled; for she had no correspondence save with Leigh, who almost always managed to give her his letters at Mrs. Griffith's, or, when he did post one, sent under cover to Mrs. Leavett. "Try and come upstairs in a few minutes, auntie, and hear all about it. I feel frightened."

"Don't you mind, my dear; I don't think you need be afraid."

Mildred hastened upstairs, and found a large blue business-like envelope directed to "Mrs. Wood" in Welby's familiar writing.

For a moment she felt cold and faint, and sat down to summon her courage before she opened it. What was her position if the worst came? Welby, from revenge, would seek to force her to return to him; this she would resist to the uttermost. But the horror of exposure, of publicity, of the dreadful comments of newspapers on a "remarkable case"—all this blazed out in a blinding flash of terrible anticipation; and above everything else the vision of Gribble's grave displeased face, when he knew that she had used his generous gift to carry out a scheme he would be sure

to condemn. But would Welby care to face exposure himself?

With a beating heart she opened the cover, and read as follows:

"The present unsettled state of things cannot go on. Let me know where I can meet you, that we may come to some agreement for our mutual benefit. Write to where I last saw you, under cover as before. You know my hand—I need not sign my name."

Mildred sat long in confused thought, with the letter open in her hand. At least there was no evidence here of any intention to insist on his rights—but to see him again! That was a thing to be shuddered at; she could not—would not meet him alone!

"Well, what is it, Mrs. Wood?" asked Mrs. Leavett, coming into the room, after Mildred had sat lost in thought she did not know how long.

"Read that," she replied, giving her the letter.

"Oh, good Lord!" exclaimed Mrs. Leavett, when she had read it; "it's from Mr. Welby, I suppose! What on earth shall you do, my dear?"

"I don't know yet. I must ask Mr. Leigh; he can advise——"

"Oh dear, yes—that he can! We'll just send off Dick to his chambers with a note, and make him wait for an answer."

"No," returned Mildred, and paused; then continued slowly, "There is nothing so safe and secret as the post; and there is no need for special haste. I will write to Mr. Leigh, and send this to him; then what he advises I will do."

She rose and got her writing-book.

"I think," she said, when she had written a short note, and enclosed with it Welby's epistle—"I think this looks well for my future safety; only hatred is active, and oh, he hates me!"

"Better his hatred than his love!" cried Mrs. Leavett.

"Far, far better!" sighed Mildred.

"Shall Dick run and post that?"

"No, thank you; remember how strictly Mr. Leigh enjoined caution on me, never to let anyone post letters save myself or you. No, I will follow your advice, and take a long walk with Dick. I can post it as we go."

"Will she ever find peace?—my poor lamb!" thought Mrs. Leavett, looking after her as she left the room; "even if she does, it's a ruined life at best."

It was no easy task for Mildred to go through the routine of her daily duties with attention and accuracy, when the ordeal of an interview with Mr. Welby awaited her.

Brian Leigh called immediately after luncheon, evidently hoping that Mrs. Griffith might go to drive unaccompanied by her secretary; but that she was not disposed to do. Leigh was obliged to content himself with giving her a letter which he had prepared, and in which he advised her to see Welby; but to be careful not to see him alone—to secure Mrs. Leavett's presence—to keep a bold front, and try to come to some understanding as regarded their keeping the peace towards each other.

"I have just seen my detective," he concluded, "and he tells me Welby has withdrawn his. This fits

in with his attempt to make an arrangement with you, and augurs well for your future peace. I return Welby's note, and if I hear nothing to the contrary, will call on you the day after to-morrow, to hear the report of your meeting."

Mildred therefore wrote to Welby, in accordance with this advice, appointing the following evening, and mentioning that she could only see him in the presence of Mrs. Leavett.

She was surprised at the comparative calmness with which she awaited the advent of her husband.

"Dear auntie!" she said, "you must receive Mr. Welby first. I feel as if I could not bear to be with him alone for a moment."

"That you shan't, my dear!" cried Mrs. Leavett, who had put on her best dress and cap, and presented an air of iron respectability.

Quarter-past eight had just chimed from a neighbouring church clock, when a loud scattered knock at the private door (houses in Morton Street still had knockers) made Mildred start and rush to her bedroom, while Mrs. Leavett assumed a look of immovable rigidity.

The servant presently ushered in Mr. Welby, wrapped in an extra long overcoat, as the evening was wet and chill. This added greatly to his natural portliness, and he seemed, to Mrs. Leavett, to be double the size she remembered him, and to fill up the doorway as he came in. He started round him with a look of savage contempt.

"Where is Mrs.——"

He stopped in his question, not knowing what name to use.

"She will be here directly. Will you sit down?"

"Are you the woman who was with Mrs. Carr when she died?" he asked rudely, without noticing her invitation to be seated.

"I am."

"Well then, you know she was surrounded by every comfort. I have had a pretty return!"

Before she could reply, Mildred in her ordinary long, plain black dress came into the room. Husband and wife stood facing each other for a minute. Welby's eyes slowly sank beneath hers.

"Come!" said he abruptly, "I don't want any nonsense and playacting. You've done me mischief enough. I want to come to some understanding that you'll do me no more. You broke up my home first, and prevented my making myself another—what more do you want?"

"I had no choice but to prevent your making a second marriage."

"You might have kept dead, as you seemed. However, that's done! What's to be your next move?"

"Tell me your object in seeking this interview?"

"Well, I want to know if you are going to attack me publicly, and hope to get back to be mistress of my house; because I don't think it would be pleasant for you—and I am prepared to expose you thoroughly."

"That I do not in the least fear. May I ask what is your objection to take me back?"

"Because I don't want you—I hate the sight of you! You are a bad, unprincipled woman—I never could make you out. No good ever came of fanciful, high-flown, upsetting beggars; and—and it would be

ridiculous—I'd be the laughing-stock of the City. Why, I have put the finest tablet they have in Brownlow Hill Chapel, to your memory—an ornament to the place, and cost me £130! Then everyone knew I was going to marry Burton's daughter, and people were saying how I was always generous and disinterested when I might have had a rich widow or an heiress any day. You've been a perfect curse to me! What made you seem to do away with yourself?"

"Because I was sick to death of life with you—of your selfish cruelty, of your ingrained meanness. But *you* cannot understand what was intolerable to me. It is waste of time to express our dislike of each other. Sit down and tell me what you wish."

Welby stared at her, amazed. Could this be the silent quiet girl who used to be so mindful of his wishes, so gently imploring, so timidly urgent to win him to her own way of thinking—this pale, resolute, composed woman, whose eyes mastered his? He sat down with an odd feeling of being subdued and powerless. The thin coating of his showy self-assertion was pierced through, the cruel tyrannous desire to impose his own will on others set at nought, and the swamp of low avarice, selfish greed, and shabby cowardice which formed the basis of his character laid bare.

"I don't want to waste time," he said. "What I have to say is this, and it's as well your—your confederate hears it too. You must leave the country. If you agree to go, and undertake never to molest me or use my name, I'll make you a fair allowance. And

if you don't, I'll—I'll expose you in every court in the kingdom."

"It is useless to repeat that threat. It has no terrors for me."

"What life have you been living," burst out Welby, "that you have grown so brazen?" Then he checked himself. "I suppose you haven't too much money. Wouldn't it be better for you to live away from London—away from everyone you have ever known, with a safe income, than to be at the beck and call of a haughty old duchess like Mrs. Griffith? I have heard of her."

"What do you call abroad?" asked Mrs. Leavett.

"I am not going to answer you. You have no business to put in your talk. I don't care where you go, provided you undertake never to molest me or use my name, or interfere in any way. And, on my part, I will give you a hundred a year."

"That is not enough," said Mildred, irresistibly impelled to try how far he would go. "It is penury."

"You were always an extravagant, reckless, unprincipled creature. A decent well-behaved woman could live well on it."

"I should not attempt existence on so miserable a pittance."

"How much do you want, then?" asked Welby, growing livid with suppressed fury.

"Nothing from you!" exclaimed Mildred, unable to repress her scorn. "I can earn my own bread; and I wish to be free. I do not fear exposure, nor do I want to molest you. I do not want to assume your name. I do not want to come near you; but I will bear no interference on your part, nor accept any

dictation. I will not leave England unless it suits me to do so. But you may make your mind easy; I will seek no publicity, nor compel you to incur heavy law expenses unless you drive me to it. And law expenses are a serious consideration, Mr. Welby."

"I know it, I know it!" he groaned. "Then will you promise not to reveal your existence to anyone?"

"To no one save my brother or Mr. Gribble, should either of them come to England."

"Gribble! Good God! he is the last man I—— He has behaved very badly to me, and why should you tell him? He'll never look at a woman who has run away from her home."

"Be that as it may, I will not undertake to keep my existence hidden from him; but I will not permit him to disturb you on my account. So long as you do not interfere with me or attempt to marry, I will keep quiet."

"But what guarantee have I?—what hold have I over you if I am to pay you no money?"

"I do not want your money!" repeated Mildred, perceiving her advantage. "And you must just trust my promise. I do not want to be troubled with you, and I am content to live and work in obscurity."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Welby, with an oath. "There is some deep-laid scheme under all this humility."

"How dare you speak to my young lady like that!" cried Mrs. Leavett, who had been swelling with wrath for some time. "Isn't it enough for you to have made her so miserable that she destroyed herself, but you must come here to insult her?"

"Dear Koo!" said Mildred, "pray do not speak to

Mr. Welby—excitement can do no good." Then turning to him: "There is no use for further words—we must trust each other's promise; there is nothing else by which we can be bound."

"I'd like to know how you got in with these Griffiths; and what was your object in pushing on that good-for-nothing young fellow's marriage? The day will come when his wife (that ought to have been my wife!) won't thank you! I suppose you got a round sum for your trouble!"

Mildred smiled.

"You can suppose what you like."

"Then you have told that—that jackanapes your story?"

"I have never revealed myself to any living soul but Mrs. Leavett."

Welby looked eagerly into her face as she spoke, while a more contented expression stole over his countenance. After a pause he exclaimed:

"There is little more to be said. I am ready to promise I shall not interfere with you, if you will give an undertaking not to cross me."

"That I willingly agree to; but the next time you set spies upon me I shall put my case in the hands of a solicitor, and demand alimony or restitution of my rights as your wife."

It cost Mildred no small effort to make this bold assertion.

"It strikes me," said Welby, with a keen look, "that the success of such a claim wouldn't exactly suit your book."

"I do not think reunion would add to our happiness," replied Mildred.

"I have only to repeat," said Welby, "that I shall rigidly avoid annoying you in any way, so long as you keep your promise; but should you determine to quit England, I will allow you the sum of one hundred and fifty pounds yearly, so long as you live out of the country."

"And I repeat my promise to keep my existence a secret, and never to trouble you in any way unless I hear you are going to marry."

Welby rose.

"There is no more to be said; and I earnestly hope I may never see your face again!"

So saying, he opened the door and went out, with bent shoulders and a crestfallen air.

Mildred and Mrs. Leavett looked at each other for an instant in silence; then both exclaimed, "Thank God!"

"I think," said Mildred, stretching out her hand, "I am safe for some time to come, dear old friend! He dreads me more than I dread him! Did I do well? was I steady?"

"You were just everything you ought to be!" cried Mrs. Leavett. "The villain! he couldn't stand before you!"

"Oh, Koo! think of the horror of being that man's wife—his bond-slave, as I was! How was it that I once believed him to be kind, considerate, disinterested! that my dear mother, too, believed in him! You cannot think how generous and thoughtful he seemed; his affection for myself appeared a sort of self-forgetful benevolence."

"His affection! Lord bless you, Miss Milly! there is not affection in the likes of him—only greed of one

kind or another! But I do think you have seen the last of him for a good long time to come."

"Yes, for some time; but if he can ever revenge himself, he will make me pay for that tablet!" and she broke out into a low laugh that startled Mrs. Leavett.

"Don't, my dear!" she exclaimed; "you are just overdone. You had better get away to your bed; a good night's rest will set you up."

"But first I must write an account of this interview to Mr. Leigh."

"Yes—I suppose you must; and a good true counsellor he is—I don't doubt it. Yet, my dear, take care!"

Mildred looked very gravely and steadily at her, and said impressively:

"I will, Koo—good old friend, I will!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE days went quickly after this memorable meeting between Mildred and her husband, and Mrs. Griffith's departure for the country was at hand. She grew more and more indignant with Mildred as the time drew near, when she found she could not persuade her to change her determination. Still, she would not relinquish an hour of her service; and compassion for the disappointment she was obliged to inflict made the favourite secretary exceedingly yielding.

Feeling sure that Welby had ceased to spy upon his wife, Leigh, somewhat against Mildred's judgment, ventured to pay her a visit; when, after a long discussion of many matters vital to them both, Leigh remarked:

"As you are now tolerably safe, and Mrs. Griffith's house will soon be closed, I will venture to go over to Paris for a short time. I want to see some political friends there, and form a sounder opinion of the condition of things than I can at this distance, as I am going to write some articles on French affairs. I trust, however, you will not hesitate to say you would prefer my remaining, if my doing so would be any comfort."

"Oh no! I would not have you stay here on any account. It will do you good to go to Paris; and there is nothing now for me to fear. I must learn to lean on myself."

"I shall make inquiries, while I am away, as to the desirability of Paris for your future abode, and on other points; and you will write to me. Keep me *au courant* of what is going on. I can always be with you in twelve hours after the receipt of a letter. You must not hesitate to summon me, if you think fit."

The day but one after this conversation, Mrs. Griffith bade her young secretary farewell with more kindness than she expected, and for the present "her occupation was o'er."

* * * * *

Life seemed very strange to Mildred without either Leigh or her daily attendance on Mrs. Griffith—strange and terribly empty during the long, warm, blazing June days.

She had ample time to think of the past—to dream of the future. From one terrible fear she had been delivered. Welby's dislike and dread of her was a guarantee of safety; still, the blankness of her future was appalling, chiefly because her sense of right told her it must be spent away from Leigh.

She thought, with profound misgiving of her own feelings, how much she loved this man, how he transfused her heart, her spirit, with his personality! Besides the mysterious attraction of a nature she felt to be the complement of her own—of the tenderness, the veiled passion shown to her only, which lay unsuspected under the cool reserve of his ordinary manner—his companionship was a keen intellectual pleasure that roused her own mental powers into activity, and the quiet strength of will which was one source of his restful composure, gave her a sense of support which was infinitely delicious. Yes, whatever of pain and struggle lay in the future, she thanked heaven for sending such an experience. *But*—she dreaded his power over her, which every interview increased. Might not the day come when she could no longer refuse such an union as he had, in the passion and excitement of his first avowal, dared to propose? That must not be. A life of deception—or a life of defiance! Defiance of opinion would wear out the truest, fondest affection, and unacknowledged love, under the guise of friendship, with its trials, suppression, and irritations, has always more or less marred the career, the existence of a man thus invisibly bound.

The fiat of rectitude and common sense was separation. This she accepted, and resolved somewhat vaguely to obey. But where could she go? She

looked with shivering dread at the dark abyss of the cold, cruel "unknown," into which her resolution required her to plunge. Not yet, however, need she take any tremendous step. She must talk with Leigh, she must do nothing rashly; and in the meantime she must try not to grow morbid, not to exaggerate unavoidable evils.

She occupied herself as diligently as she could. She gave some of her time to Dick, to the great improvement of that young gentleman, and took long walks with him in the summer evenings. Then Leigh wrote frequent delightful letters, full of descriptions and theories, and matter for thought, as unlover-like as a lover's letter could be; but all through ran an under-current of tender consideration, of careful regard for her needs of heart and mind, that filled the recipient's spirit with pride, with gratitude, with passionate grief, to think the time would soon come when she must resign it all, and stand alone in the deep shadow of her strange destiny.

* * * * *

Leigh remained somewhat longer in Paris than he at first intended, and it was Midsummer-day before he again appeared in Morton Street.

Of the two, Mildred was the most agitated at this reunion. The joy of hearing his voice, of feeling the lingering grasp of his hand, was almost too much for her self-control. But she made a brave and successful struggle with her own weakness, and listened with deep interest to Leigh's account of the state of affairs in Paris.

"I had a curious experience yesterday," he resumed, after a short pause. "When I arrived in the

morning, I found, among others, an invitation to dinner at the house of a very advanced Liberal M.P., and knowing I should meet some men there whom I wanted to see, I went, and had the honour of sitting next to Mr. Welby."

"Is it possible! How very curious!" cried Mildred, with a slight shudder. "And did you speak to him?"

"Yes, a great deal. I drew him out as much as I could. He little thought the murderous wishes that flitted through his interlocutor's brain," added Leigh, smiling, while his eyes sought hers. "It was altogether an extraordinary encounter. He is not stupid, that tyrant of yours. Intense regard for his own interests lends him a kind of shilling-razor sharpness. But he is utterly uneducated and dense in all directions except what bears on business or money-making —a mere cowardly animal! To think of that man ever having called you 'wife' is maddening! It is impossible to express the sort of wild rage it rouses in me. In politics he is a thoroughly self-seeking bourgeois. Had he been born among the upper ten, he would be the highest of high Tories, and enjoy trampling down the rascal multitude."

"And you really talked with Mr. Welby?"

"Really, absolutely; and I don't wish to repeat the dose. Was he so stout and short-necked in former days?"

"No, not nearly so bad."

"Hum! Your loss has certainly not broken his heart."

"It is a certain satisfaction to know he has not more feeling than I credited him with. I suppose he

found some consolation in erecting the costly tablet he described to my memory. I should greatly like to see it."

"What irony of fate to go and read the tribute of affection inscribed by a bereaved husband, who is in a white heat of indignant rage because his adored wife has returned to life. Do come. Put on a thick veil, and let me come with you. I can find out when Welby goes out of town."

"No, no; it would not be seemly. And now Mr. Welby will not leave town till Parliament rises. Politics, as well as 'noblesse oblige.'"

"Well, if you will not let me come with you to church or chapel, may I not have a walk—an excursion somewhere with you? It could be managed with perfect safety, and would, to me at least, be heavenly. Your life must be awfully monotonous. You are looking pale, too. There is an indescribable languor about you that shows mental inanition. Leave it to me to arrange 'some little break in your dull days.'"

"I dare not venture. It would be wrong. It is vain to hope for pleasure in what is forbidden—in what needs to be kept secret. Everything will be known one day. *That* is always before my eyes."

"Do you know, I sometimes ask myself if such resolute prudence as yours can exist in a heart capable of loving very warmly!" exclaimed Leigh with a smile, as he rose to take leave.

"Do you think, then, that weakness is more warm and tender than strength?" said Mildred, her eyes filling at the idea of being misunderstood. "Believe

me, real affection can be resolute—resolute not for self only."

"Believe!" exclaimed Leigh; "when I believe you not, 'chaos is come again!'"

* * * * *

The season of '70 was throbbing in the final crisis of its fever. The air was alive with prophetic anticipations of a mighty struggle; and all the smaller streams of life which go to swell the mighty tide of the London ocean were in full activity.

The weeks which succeeded Leigh's return from Paris were full of dangerous subtle delight. He was cautious, self-restrained, judicious, but he managed on one pretext or another to pay occasional visits to the little Morton Street drawing-room, to break in upon the monotony of Mildred's life but too effectually, now with news of Frank and his wife, often with letters from Pennogwen, where he was under promise to pay a visit early in August. Meanwhile, the march of events in European politics went at a quick step, and on the 15th of July war was proclaimed between France and Prussia.

The following evening Leigh had come in for a short time, and had spoken about the probable results of the struggle. When he gravely said good-night, he observed he should not see her again for a few days, as he would probably be much engaged.

Mildred thought there was something she could not define in his manner, that seemed ominous and depressing. The weather was sultry, with frequent thunder-showers and much summer lightning, so that Mildred was obliged to stay indoors for nearly a week.

It was therefore with even more than her ordinary pleasure that she saw Leigh enter the room one evening without having sent on the servant to announce his coming. A second glance showed that he looked graver and paler than usual.

"You have something disagreeable to tell me?" asked Mildred, as soon as they had exchanged greetings, and he had drawn a chair near the sofa on which she was sitting.

"Disagreeable!" he repeated. "No. I have a somewhat serious question to discuss with you—though I have nearly decided it in my own mind."

"You will not need my poor help," said Mildred. "Tell me what it is."

"The man on whom our editor reckoned as war-correspondent is ill. I am asked to take his place."

"And you will go!" she exclaimed, thinking in a vivid instant how well fitted he was for such a task; how his performance of it would redound to his credit, and advance his reputation. "You will do so well! Oh! I am sure you will!"

He smiled.

"I have not yet accepted. I confess I am drawn in opposite directions. Such a post is what I should have once most desired; but—you can understand that I hesitate to leave you without a friend capable of advising you—able to supply you with information —of helping you in any way. Two months ago I should not have hesitated; I should at once have rejected the offer. Now I think you are considerably safer; still——"

"You must not give me a thought," interrupted

Mildred, her cheek flushing, her eyes sparkling. "You can do nothing more for me than you have done; and I should be most unhappy if you held back on my account. Perhaps there is more safety for me in your absence than in your presence——"

"But if Welby chose to persecute you?—there is no foreseeing the ingenuity of vicious hatred, and there is nothing to hold him back—what would become of you? That is the thought that haunts me—that unnerves me."

"I do not believe there is any such danger. If he did, I should——I suppose, to put my case in the hands of a good lawyer would be my only plan? More than this, Brian," she did not heed, in her excitement, that she used his Christian name, "to set your mind at rest, I will carry out a half-made intention, which has been much in my thoughts of late—I will write to Mr. Gribble, confess my existence to him, and ask his forgiveness and advice. However angry he may be, he will not turn against me; he will be merciful."

Leigh rose, paced down the room and back again, then stopped opposite her, and said emphatically:

"Do! I ought to have urged this long ago; it was false, unworthy of me not to have urged you. But the dread of erecting another barrier between us, of losing the delicious consciousness that I am your only friend and guardian—the secret heaven of our occasional meetings—has blinded me to what was right and just to you. Write to Gribble at once; tell him everything; ask his advice, and, if possible, abide by it. Make him your friend—*but*, if he wants to force you back to Welby, what will you do?"

"Nothing shall force me back!"

"Then, remember," said Leigh in a low voice, drawing nearer to her, "there is, while I live, always a means of breaking your chains."

"And rather than let them be again riveted, I would take the means of escape you offer!" exclaimed Mildred, with sudden fire.

"You would?" cried Leigh, his face lighting up. "I shall keep the memory of your words. Yes! should they attempt to enforce Welby's legal rights, you would be justified in evading them by *any* means."

Mildred smiled a defiant smile, that became her well.

"No," she said, "not justified; but I should not stay to think of justification! However, I do not fear; so terrible a strait will never arise. I shall escape without wrong-doing. Now you know that I shall not be friendless! Tell your editor you will go; that you will accept the post he has assigned you."

"Grant that you are in communication with Gribble," said Leigh, resuming his troubled walk, "I still can scarcely summon courage to leave you."

"You *must!*" returned Mildred. "I insist upon your accepting this opening. You cannot tell to what it may lead. Your absence may, after all, be best for me. How can we tell that Mr. Welby has renounced his espionage? Believe me, you ought for every reason to go."

"When can your letter reach Gribble?"

"In a month or five weeks at latest."

"He may come home and see you through your difficulties."

"Hardly," said Mildred, "but he would recom-

mend me to some proper agent to act for me, and"—interrupting herself—"I don't think he will be very angry with me."

"He cannot be! You will be sure to write to him?"

"I will most certainly. Stay, I will write now, while my resolution is at boiling-point—then you can see what I say."

"Thank you—thank you a hundred times for your frank confidence. If I could only know he were coming home, before I start!"

"When must you go?" asked Mildred, turning very pale.

"The day after to-morrow," said Leigh, gazing at her with passionate mournful eyes, and he closed his lips firmly, as if to retain the words which were ready to burst forth.

Mildred took her writing-book, and, after a moment's silent thought, began her letter.

With many a break and many a consultation she struggled through it, her heart beating fast, her pulses throbbing with the hope, the dread, the effort, this avowal cost her. Penetrated, too, with a conviction that she was laying the foundation of a strong barrier between herself and Leigh—that to call upon Gribble was virtually to renounce the companionship which had grown so unspeakably delightful and necessary. But she did not flinch. Her hands were cold and tremulous when she finished.

"This letter has cost you dear," said Leigh, looking at her pale cheek; "but it is wiser—better to send it! Will you trust it to me? I will post it."

"Yes—take it," said Mildred, resting her elbows

on the table, and burying her face in her hands. They were both silent; Leigh struggling against the temptation to fold her in his arms, and pour out all the passionate words that welled up from his heart—knowing that such an action would injure him in her eyes—would anger and scare her.

"Then you have fixed my fate for the present," he said at last, in a lighter tone. "I am to be war-correspondent to the *Electric Despatch*."

"Yes," returned Mildred, raising her head and collecting herself. "You are to be the brilliant, graphic, accurate correspondent, and to eclipse all others. I suppose"—hesitating a little—"I suppose a war-correspondent is not expected to go into battle—under fire?"

"On the contrary, he is expected to keep out of it," said Leigh, smiling as he perceived the feeling which prompted her question. "We knights of the pen cannot hope to gather any laurels on the fields we describe. We are very prosaic successors of the minstrels who sometimes shared the deeds they sang."

"Where shall you go first?"

"To Paris, and then on to the front—somewhere on the north-eastern frontier. I am to be with the French army."

"It is awful to think what a flood of misery will engulph the unoffending people!" said Mildred, with a shudder. "How long will this terrible war last?"

"It is impossible to say—not long, I imagine; it will be too tremendous a struggle to last."

After some more conversation, Leigh was obliged to leave, as he had more to do than he could well accomplish.

"So long as communications with Paris are maintained, I can send my letters regularly; but should you not hear, you must conclude that the post is not running. And you will write to me? For God's sake do not give up writing to me!"

"I will not—at least, till something is more clearly decided as regards my future."

"I see there is some project in your mind," said Leigh anxiously; "can you not trust me?"

"I shall tell you everything in my letters."

"Let me warn you again—always post your letters yourself. I shall see you before I start; my last visit shall be here."

When he was gone, Mildred threw herself into a corner of the sofa, too stunned and overwhelmed for a few moments to think distinctly. The parting she knew must and ought to be inevitable had come. Whatever Leigh hoped or expected, it was her bounden duty to make it final.

Her time for action was in his absence; under the glamour of his eyes, the charm of his voice, she was almost powerless—almost, but not altogether. Surely she could gather moral force enough to do that which was right in her own eyes—to act by the light of conscience?

What an awful, hopeless void the future seemed! She would not look at it now; there was time enough after he was gone. She would be calm and cheerful, and help him in their parting. He seemed quite sure there was no danger in the task he had undertaken. Heat, and fatigue, and hardship of many kinds he must encounter. But he was an experienced traveller —a resolute, resourceful man; and in the excitement,

the ambition of the life opening to him, he would have no time to dream of her, and pine for what was impossible. It would be so much better for him to give her up, to forget her; she honestly wished he might. But what bitter burning tears she shed over the probability of her wishes being fulfilled!

She had scarcely dried her eyes when Mrs. Leavett came into the room.

"Why, dear, dear! Miss Milly, what is the matter?"

"Mr. Leigh has been here to tell me he is going away to the French army as war-correspondent. He has made me write to Mr. Gribble, telling him everything. The letter cost me a most painful effort; but it is done, Koo—Mr. Leigh has taken it to the post."

"Well, my lamb! I am right glad to hear it. Mr. Leigh is a wise, good gentleman. Now that Mr. Welby knows you are living, and doesn't want you, there is no reason why Mr. Gribble shouldn't be told. And he'll tell Mr. Arthur; and they'll all come home, and you will not need to hide your head any longer, my dear young lady."

"In short, stick will beat dog, and dog will bite pig, and pig will get over the stile," said Mildred, with a smile. "Oh, Koo! I almost wish I might give up the struggle, and just live hidden away for the rest of my days as your niece!"

"Hoot toot, my dear! you'd soon weary of that sort of life. You must cheer up; the best of your years are to come—there is many a change and many an hour of sunshine before you. All I hope and trust is that good gentleman Mr. Leigh won't get shot!"

"He says there is not the least danger."

"Of course he does; but I don't quite believe it.

And," lowering her voice, "don't you be vexed with me for what I am going to say—it's a great deal better for him to be at a distance than breaking his heart here—better and safer for you, too. Ah! what have you ever done that misfortune has such a spite against you?"

Mildred could find no answer.

"There is nothing to be done now but to wait," she said; "I must sit still until Mr. Gribble's answer comes. What an inexpressible solace to be with you, my own dear, good, generous Koo!"

A passionate burst of weeping on Mrs. Leavett's stout shoulder helped Mildred to regain composure and resignation.

* * * * *

With swift yet leaden flight went the hours till Leigh's last visit. He came equipped for his journey, intending to go to the station after bidding Mildred good-bye.

Their conversation was intermittent, weighted with the crushing sense that these might be their last words together, which made their hearts almost too full for speech. Mildred was outwardly the calmer and most self-possessed.

They talked of Frank Griffith and his happiness; of Mrs. Griffith; of Lady Mary Dacre, who was making a prolonged stay at Pennogwen; and of Gwendoline Ferrers, whose marriage was fixed for the twenty-fifth of August.

A solemn promise from Mildred to write, to keep him informed of everything, full directions given to her where she should write, and Leigh looked at his watch; then he stood up, saying, "I must go," his set

face and compressed lips showing what an effort it cost him to preserve his composure.

Mildred rose too, looking very white.

"Good-bye," she said. "God bless you! You have been a true friend to me."

He wrung her hand, and turned silently to leave; but at the door he paused, stepped back, and with a sudden overpowering impulse held out his arms.

"Mildred!" he cried, and the pain in his voice thrilled through her veins, "we may never meet again!"

At his cry, every consideration except the idea his words suggested vanished from her mind; with a sympathetic movement, as irresistible, she started forward and gave herself to his passionate embrace, her arms clinging for an instant round his neck, till the strong beating of his heart against her breast frightened her into an effort to withdraw; he pressed her to him long and silently, then with a husky murmured good-bye, he released her, and went hastily away.

To Mildred the parting seemed indeed for ever; before he returned, what changes might not occur? and in any case, she must endeavour so to arrange her life that she should be out of his sight and reach.

Mrs. Leavett was surprised to find her so quiet, so composed, so reasonable. But it was the stillness of temporary death. She scarce knew what her old friend said, or what she answered; all was chaotic darkness —and so was to-morrow and to-morrow. Then came a little spark of light—a long letter from Leigh, written from Paris, couched in the language of friendship, but the light of tenderest affection glowing through the cooler form of the words.

He wrote brightly, describing some of the difficulties he had to surmount in order to obtain introductions to the officers with the division of the army which would probably bear the brunt of the first onset; and dwelling on the characteristic indifference, the smiling cynicism of the Parisian world towards the coming struggle, so long as they could dine and dress and have their mental palate stimulated and gratified by witty, admirably well-acted dramas. What did they care for the *bêtises* of their rulers! That suffering, and cold, and hunger, grief and conquest, should touch the gates of their fairy city, was undreamed of —impossible to their ideas.

So Mildred grew gradually accustomed to the dim grey atmosphere in which her future life would probably be passed. Her excitement, and it was intense, lay in the letters of "our own correspondent."

"How was it possible!" she asked herself, "that he could give such stirring descriptions of battles and retreats, if he were not in the midst of the fray?"

She occasionally received short, private letters, telling little about himself, and referring her to his published communications; but always craving for news of her, and giving careful directions as to where his letters should be addressed.

So days and weeks dragged on their weary length, and astonished Europe was gradually realizing the amazing fact that the famous legions of France were failing before the tremendous onset of the Teutonic hordes.

This enforced quiet—this compulsory breathing-space upon the bridge of time—was a trial of strength. Mildred did her best to be busy, to wear away the

time; still it was weary work. She watched the progress of the war. She bought a map of its seat, and studied it with the keenest attention. She read the descriptions of "our own correspondent" aloud to Mrs. Leavett and Dick, and waited, waited with steadily repressed impatience, for the reply to her letter. If Gribble were alive he would certainly write something, either in kindness or in anger. Another month, and she *must* have his answer.

And now Leigh's letters grew more and more irregular; sometimes one of an earlier date would appear after one more recent; his notes to Mildred were shorter, graver, more hurried. Then all communications ceased. Finally came the tremendous news of the capitulation of Sedan—the establishment of the Republic—and still no communication from Leigh.

Mildred's feverish uneasiness grew more and more intense. She had no one in whose opinion she had any faith to speak to.

A short paragraph at the end of the leading articles in her eagerly read papers gave her some comfort at last.

"The cessation of letters from our careful and graphic correspondent proves that communication has become difficult, if not impossible, since the great army of the north has ceased to exist. His friends need not, however, feel uneasy, as he will probably make his way to Thionville or Metz, whence we may soon hope to receive a fresh instalment of his vivid descriptions."

This was possible, and suggested a plausible and satisfactory reason for his silence.

Meantime, the marriage of "Miss Ferrers with Co-

lonel Egerton Griffith" had been duly announced. It had taken place, somewhat to Mildred's surprise, at Pennogwen. She did not think that Mrs. Griffith would have permitted the ceremony to take place there; but as Mr. Ferrers had no settled place of abode, and the old Welsh residence had been Gwendoline's home in early girlhood, it was a natural arrangement enough.

Mildred had been much gratified by a letter dictated by Mrs. Griffith inquiring kindly for her, and telling her that Mr. Leigh, as might have been anticipated, had gone off as war-correspondent to the *Electric Despatch;* but as the army to which he was attached was broken up, she (Mrs. Griffith) expected him to return from day to day, as she supposed he could make his way back through Belgium and by Ostend. She merely added: "You will have seen my son's marriage in the papers. Let me know what you are doing, and if you have received the summons you have waited for so patiently. I think, after all, you might have accompanied me to Pennogwen." This had been written by Mrs. Watkin for the blind lady, and Mildred felt how great was the favour in which she must stand to be thus remembered and noticed.

If everyone took the same view as to the cause of Leigh's silence, she was foolish and morbid to look always on the darker side. She made a strong effort to rouse herself, and with a hope of finding help in movement, walked one morning across the Park to Piccadilly, intending to do some shopping for Mrs. Leavett in Regent Street.

She was growing braver, and ventured into the town more frequently. It was now two years since

her death and resurrection. She must be forgotten by the few who had known her; and even if anyone fancied they saw a likeness to her former self, none would consider it more than accidental and startling.

The air was fresh and crisp with the first breath of autumn, and Mildred felt cheered and invigorated by change and movement. It was the selling-off period, and having secured some bargains which she knew would delight Mrs. Leavett's heart, she turned her steps homeward. Pausing to read the placard on a newspaper office, she learned that Paris was invested, ingress and egress without a permit being prohibited. While her eager eyes drank in the announcement, she did not notice that a well-dressed distinguished-looking man, with fair hair and moustaches, was looking at her earnestly, and was greatly startled when he addressed her.

"Why, Mrs. Wood! I am very glad to see you! Have you and my mother parted company?"

"Mr. Griffith!" she exclaimed, colouring quickly. "I thought you were in Ireland."

"I am only in London for a few days, and I have been trying to get news of Leigh. Do you know that he was with the French army, and——"

"Yes; Mrs. Griffith mentioned it in a letter she was so good as to send me."

"We are a little uneasy about him. But the fellows at the *E. D.* office say they would certainly have heard had he been hit or disabled. And where are you now?"

"Always with my aunt. I hope," with a smile, "Mrs. Griffith is well?"

"She is admirably well, and makes a first-rate lady

of the manor. You know, Lord Milford insists on our taking his place in all ways. I like the country and the people, and I shall always believe that you brought me my good luck. I often talk of you to Dollie. You must come over and see us. I'll make Dollie write to you."

"You are very good!"

"So Godfrey is married, and to Gwen Ferrers! I never was so astonished! I hope she will manage him, and I hope he'll turn over a new leaf. How are you yourself, Mrs. Wood? I can't say you are looking as blooming as you did at Pennogwen."

"London in July and August is not the place in which to gather roses."

"True. But you really don't look well. Excuse my brutal frankness. And your address is always" —pulling out his pocket-book and pencil—"eighteen, Morton Street. Thank you. I knew it was somewhere near Eccleston Square. I suppose Leigh told you something of our close shave—of how nearly I lost my little wife? That fellow Welby had almost snapped her up. However, he didn't behave badly on the whole."

"Mr. Leigh, knowing the interest I took, gave me some outline of your difficulties."

"Yes; I told him to put you *au fait*."

"I must bid you good-morning," said Mildred, who was afraid to stand talking to him any longer, though it was inexpressibly delightful to hear his voice and see his face, so associated in her mind with Leigh, and which carried her back to the first days of her mental convalescence, a year ago at Pennogwen. "I suppose"—she could not resist putting the question

—"I suppose Mr. Leigh's friends need not be anxious about him?"

"No, I hope not. Of course the whole country where he is must be in an awful state of disorganization—very difficult to get out of it, and all that—but Leigh was always a fearless sort of fellow, and would probably push himself into danger. Still, his editor did not seem at all uneasy—and he is of the greatest value officially. Good-bye, Mrs. Wood; very glad to have met you."

Mildred walked on towards home—disturbed yet cheered by this meeting. If Leigh's best friend and chum—a kindly, warm-hearted man like Frank Griffith—was so little disturbed by his silence and disappearance, she was disquieting herself in vain. Yes, she might hope that he was safe and well—that once more they might meet, even were it to part again.

Stirred and enlivened by air and exercise, Mildred gave herself up to the pleasure of castle-building. Bright and vivid were the pictures which framed themselves against the sombre background of her actual existence—of Leigh's safe return; of the unspeakable rapture of meeting; of union—acknowledged, honourable union—of a busy, active, tranquil life spent with him.

"Why should I not dream sweet dreams, if sober certainty of waking be so cruel—so hard to bear? Dreams wrong no one, and will not draw him I love into pain or trouble. To have him always near—always ready to counsel and to direct—it was heaven even to dream of it!"

She was surprised to find herself near home, so occupied had she been by these thoughts.

"If you please, ma'am," said the servant as she admitted her, "there's a gentleman in the drawing-room as wants to see missus. The parlour is all turned out for a good clean, so I was obliged to put him there, 'm."

"A gentleman!" exclaimed Mildred, her heart beating wildly. Could it be a messenger from Leigh? Could it be himself? "What sort of gentleman?"

"I dunno, ma'am—a commercial traveller, I think. Missus is coming to him directly."

"A commercial traveller—that was very likely," thought Mildred; yet, urged by unusual curiosity, she went quickly upstairs, opened the drawing-room door, and walked in. A short, stout man, with rather bent shoulders, was standing in one of the windows, his hands clasped behind him in an attitude of reflection—an attitude familiar to her. She started, and let her sunshade fall. The stranger turned at the sound. It was Peter Gribble!

CHAPTER XIII.

When Gribble's eyes fell upon the tall, slender black figure standing by the door in the full sunlight, he made a backward, staggering step, extending one hand with a gesture of awe and astonishment, his round, brown face grew pale, and for a moment he was speechless. Mildred, frightened at the effect her appearance produced, kept quite still.

"Mrs. Welby!" exclaimed Gribble, with a kind of gasp. "Oh! good Lord, is it your real living self?"

"It is indeed!" cried Mildred, stretching out her hands to him. "Can you forgive me for deceiving you! Are you angry with me for—for being alive?"

"Oh, my dear"—coming over to her at a run, and seizing both her hands with his thick, stumpy fingers —"let me look at you, and make sure of you! I am a happy man this day! If you only knew how I have blamed myself for not having at least *tried* to carry out your wish for a separation from Welby, you'd understand the blessed relief of finding you alive! Somehow, I never felt as if you were dead. Something always told me I'd find you again! Anyway, I have done my best for your brother. You'd be pleased to see him."

"I know I should! Oh! Mr. Gribble, to see you once more! to hear your kind voice—it is too much joy!"

For a few moments neither could speak.

"But how—how did you escape if they saw you fall?"

"But I did not fall."

The entrance of Mrs. Leavett interrupted her. The surprise and delight of the faithful woman was great.

"Mr. Gribble! thank God!" she cried. "I have prayed and prayed you might come back, to be a friend to my poor, dear young lady. You won't turn against her?"

"Why, no—of course not, you good soul!" To Mildred: "And have you been hiding here all the time since you—you disappeared?"

"Not quite; but I shall tell you my whole story, and you will forgive me, won't you? I know it was a frightful thing to do—I know I broke a very solemn

engagement—but it was to save my real life that I seemed to die."

"My dear, you *have* done very wrong, but *I* have no right to judge you; and I am sure you will repair the ill, so far as in you lies."

"If you will still interest yourself in me," cried Mildred, taking his hand, and smoothing it in both her own, "I shall be guided by your advice, save in one direction."

"My poor child," said Gribble tenderly, "you have been sorely tried. I can say no more until I have heard your whole confession."

"And that will make your hair stand on end!" exclaimed Mrs. Leavett. "The like of it was never found in any book, old or new."

"I suspect it will beat the best three volumes of mystery," returned Gribble. "May it have a happy ending!"

"Have you time to hear it, for it is a long history?" asked Mildred.

"Yes, I will put off everything to listen. Just tell me this—Has Welby any idea you are still alive?"

"He knows I am."

"And he hasn't taken measures to punish you, eh!"

"No."

"Are you sure you are fit to bear the telling of such a tale as yours, Miss Milly, dear?" asked Mrs. Leavett anxiously. "You look *that* pale and tired out!"

"I shall not rest until I do," returned Mildred decidedly.

"Then I'll just go away, and send you up some tea. This is a blessed day—the best I've seen since that dear lamb came back from the grave to me!"

"Think, dear Uncle Gribble, what a refuge my old friend's house has been to me! Without it, what would have become of me?"

"Yes—what a position you put yourself in!"

Left alone with her newly-recovered friend, Mildred plunged into her strange history, to which Gribble listened with profoundest wondering interest, watching her speaking face, and infinitely touched by her occasional touches of unconscious pathos—the tears which sometimes welled over and dropped unheeded, the slight expressive, graceful gestures, which added to the dramatic force of her narrative.

She went clearly, though briefly, through the details she had to relate, conveying a vivid picture to Gribble's mind of her strange adventures. When she came to the period where she so narrowly escaped an encounter with Lady Mary Dacre, Gribble raised and resettled himself in his chair with an "Ay! ay!" expressive of intense attention. Then he put one or two questions about Leigh, the drift of which Mildred did not quite see.

When the intended marriage of Welby was mentioned, Gribble uttered a low whistle, and rubbed his hands at her description of the interview with her husband.

Tea stood unheeded while Mildred spoke, and the shadows of an early autumnal evening closed upon them before the tale was done.

"Well, this beats all ever I heard or read!" cried Gribble, when Mildred at last ceased, and pale, trembling, exhausted, laid her arm over the end of the sofa where she sat, and her head upon it, scarcely able to sit up. "You are pretty well done. I will

give you a cup of tea; or, indeed, a glass of wine would——"

"No, no! a cup of tea will revive me," she interrupted.

This Gribble gravely administered, pouring out one for himself afterwards.

"Now tell me one or two things. These two men who have got mixed up with you, Griffith and Leigh, are cousins of Trevor, are they not?"

"Mr. Griffith is—not Mr. Leigh."

"Trevor has given me letters to both; I went to deliver them to-day. Griffith was in town, but not at the club. Leigh appears to be away; his chambers are closed."

"Yes," said Mildred faintly; "he went to the seat of war as correspondent to the *Electric Despatch*. How glad he will be to hear we have met! He urged me strongly to write to you, and I did so about two months ago."

"Eh! to Calcutta? Ah! I left more than two months ago. I had been ailing for some time. Indeed, I should have come home sooner, but that I stopped to see your brother married. Lord! now that his luck has turned, what luck that boy has had! He is a nice fellow, and like you in a way—he was always reminding me of you. Well, I landed at Brindisi, and was obliged to make a round by Venice and Munich, Cologne and Brussels, to Ostend, to avoid the fighting. I think the journey set me up. But to come back to yourself. When the news of your death reached us, after I had your letter saying you had drawn out half the money I had left for your use, I *couldn't* believe it! It was borne in upon me that there was some trick in

it—a deep dodge to do Welby; and I was angry with you—yes, I was, my dear! For up to that you had done so well, and held your ground nobly! Then I said to myself, 'If she's above ground, she'll write to the old friend, who loved her;' but no word ever came. Then your brother appeared, and I was glad to be able to help him. *He* had no doubt you were gone; and I can tell you I had a sore heart. My only comfort was in Lizzie's letters. She is a good little soul! Do you know she is married to that smart fellow we met in Paris?—a rising man, a very rising man. Well, through all I had a sort of unreasonable idea that somehow or other you did *not* slip down that crevasse, till I saw Trevor, and his account convinced me—at any rate, while he was talking to me. But that five hundred pounds! You never would have taken that with you if you hadn't made some scheme; and the scheme wasn't suicide, or you wouldn't have wanted money."

"Well thought, dear Uncle Gribble! I may call you Uncle Gribble, like Lizzie?"

"Ay, that you may! Well, as I drew near England, the notion that you might be alive, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, would haunt me. I determined to visit Chamouni, and talk to that old guide myself; but I was obliged to go on first to London. Now the question is, what's best to be done?"

"The best thing to be done is to do nothing," said Mildred, in a low impressive tone. "Mr. Welby does not want me back. I would face death—anything—rather than a return to him; and, believe me, 'masterly inactivity' is my best policy."

"I shall think a bit before I suggest anything; you

have had excitement enough for one day. Why, you are trembling from head to foot! I'll just leave you to rest."

"Oh no! don't leave me yet! You don't know all you are to me. I seem to have taken hold of life again now that I have seen you. And tell me, are you very angry with me for breaking my marriage-vow? for using the money you gave me to carry out what I knew you would disapprove?"

"I don't deny that I am vexed with you—it was wrong, very wrong; but oh, my poor child, I can't scold you when you have just been given back from the grave! I'll tell you all I think to-morrow. I suspect you have punished yourself severely enough."

"I am quite willing to bear the punishment. Now tell me something of my dear brother."

Whereupon Gribble opened his budget, and gave a full account of Arthur's doings, from his first appearance in his (Gribble's) office to his courtship and marriage—a history that filled Mildred with joy and thankfulness.

At last Gribble tore himself away, being engaged to dine with some Indian acquaintance.

"I'll come early to-morrow, and we'll consult what's best to be done. I cannot agree to your leading a mysterious concealed existence. I must have that put right, cost what it may!"

Then he rang and asked the servant for Mrs. Leavett, and with some solemnity committed Mildred to her care. "I'll be with you to-morrow, early, about eleven, and we will make up our minds as to what course we shall pursue. God bless you, my dear! I can't be hard on you."

Mildred was quite exhausted by the strong emotion, the joy, the amazement through which she had passed.

In one unexpected moment the visions, the hopes, the doubts, over which she had so often brooded, were realized and solved. She could hardly believe it. And dear kind Uncle Gribble was not disposed to be severe; yet he had some design in his head! What could it be?

On the most momentous question she was at rest —her husband had a sincere dread of having anything further to say to her.

* * * * *

The question which Gribble set himself to solve was one of no small difficulty, as both husband and wife were so strongly averse to reunion, which, had Welby been willing, Gribble would have thought it his duty to urge on Mildred; it was hard to know what steps could be taken to make the fact of her being still in life generally recognised.

She was ready and anxious to obey Mr. Gribble in all things; but she felt bound by the promise she had given Welby, not to reveal herself—not to disturb the oblivion which had already stretched its sheltering veil over herself and her married life.

In vain Gribble urged the doubts to which such a concealment would give rise, as to her own character and conduct, and insisted on demanding a public recognition from Welby.

"Let him alone!" she prayed. "I have injured him. I prevent his making any other marriage. Let him keep the reputation which is all in all to him. I am content to hide myself. With your advice and

recommendation I shall find some way of earning my living. I may see you sometimes, and find as much happiness as I expect or deserve. A few near friends might know—my brother, Lizzie, and Mr. Griffith—then time would gradually smooth all obstacles to my reappearance. What is the world to me, or I to the world?"

"For all that, I'll see Welby, and try what I can do with him. I don't mean to ask him for anything in the way of money. You have broken your contract, and must abide by the consequences."

"Certainly! In that I quite agree," said Mildred. "But you are only incurring unnecessary disagreeables."

"I don't mind that," returned Gribble. "I'll run down to Winstow. I hear he is staying there with Jane. I am told he has made a large settlement upon her, which doesn't look well—at least I can't help coupling it with the report that the Brazilian Copper Mine Company is in a bad way, and I think he is very deep in that concern. But no one knows much of his affairs; he has always kept everything very dark."

Gribble carried out his threat, and descended upon the astonished bewildered Welby.

A sharp encounter ensued; but Welby was guarded, and on the defensive, though infuriated almost beyond control when he found that Gribble had already seen Mildred.

"He was like a bull with a ring through the nose," said the former, describing the interview to his *protégée*. "He was ready to toss me; but every movement hurt himself. He says he is aware he can't stop us from making any public statement we please, but wants to

know what good it will do you—as he will put in a counter-statement, describing the circumstances under which he married you; the life of luxury and indulgence you led while with him; his generosity to your mother—all which he says would be corroborated by your uncle, William Carr; and the public would draw its own conclusions as to whether you feigned death merely to escape from an uncongenial life, or from some lower motive."

"You see, dear Mr. Gribble, there is little to be gained by trying to reinstate me," cried Mildred. "You know how little mercy, how little forbearance I could expect from Mr. Welby; and before everything else I am in the wrong."

"Ay, you are! and there's the pity of it," said Gribble.

After much discussion, Gribble yielded to Mildred's persuasions and his own growing conviction.

In the course of arriving at this decision, Gribble had one or two meetings with Frank Griffith, with whom the imaginative little man was immensely pleased.

"He is one of your real gentlemen," he said one afternoon, as he was taking tea with Mildred, his almost daily habit. "It's just delightful to hear him say pleasant things, as if he couldn't help them dropping from his lips; and do the right thing, as easy as I'd bend my arm, just without a thought! Well, he ought to be a first-rate article; it takes five or six centuries to make such a chap as that. First the fighting, brutal period; then the chivalrous, religious age; then the intellectual dawn; and finally, modern philanthropy, with the proud consciousness of calling

no man master, underlying all from first to last! Lord! what a heap of degradation and misery and endurance went to make the substratum, the concrete on which your fine gentlemen are built!"

* * * * *

A day or two after Gribble's visit to Welby, Mildred had expected him earlier than usual. She had promised to accompany him to look at a house he had some idea of buying, as he now intended to settle down in London; but the hour appointed had gone by, and no Gribble appeared.

Mildred sat thinking dreamily. The joy of having Gribble once more near her, the interest of her arguments and differences of opinion with him, had not for a moment dulled the sharp edge of her anxiety about Leigh. More and more the sadness, the emptiness of life without him, weighed upon her. But she was peculiarly careful to mention his name or allude to him as little as possible. Instinct told her that if she dared indulge herself in speech on this topic, Gribble would divine the true state of the case, and be very severe on such culpable weakness. How intensely she longed for tidings of Leigh! How eagerly she scanned the columns of the *Electric Despatch!* and what variegated pictures her imagination presented of his position and the possible causes of his silence!

"I'm ever so late," cried Gribble, breaking in upon her reflections; "but you won't mind when I tell you. I called on Griffith as I came along, and found him all in a muddle, packing up. He is to be off by the mail for Ostend to-day. They have had news of poor Leigh at last; he was wounded in the battle round Sedan, and has been lying helpless in a miserable

village, where he scrawled a few lines to the office to explain his silence. Griffith is going off to him, to see if he can bring him back by easy stages. Leigh says he owes his life to his Belgian coachman, who had left the vehicle in the village and followed him."

Mildred had instinctively moved to place herself against the light when Gribble first named Leigh.

For a moment she dared not speak. She grew icy cold. With lightning quickness her startled fancy pictured the wretched cottage; the straw, probably, on which he lay; the want of every comfort; the absence of proper nourishment; the struggle for life; the brave, uncomplaining spirit with which he would endure it all—above every other ill, the terrible loneliness!

"This is indeed sad news!" she exclaimed at length, amazed at the steadiness of her own voice. "I am deeply grieved."

"So am I," returned Gribble. "He seems rather a fine fellow. He counselled *you* well and wisely. I fancy his greatest danger will be from want of proper care. I shall be anxious to have further news of him. I have been getting a lot of things for Griffith—soup and bandages, and everything I could think of—for Griffith was just a little dazed, and bothering about writing to his wife."

"How good and thoughtful you always are, dear Uncle Gribble!" exclaimed Mildred, clasping his hand. "God grant Mr. Leigh may be saved! He has been very, very good to me."

"I believe it," said Gribble, looking earnestly at her. "Why, how cold your hand is! Give me a cup of tea, and we will go away and see the house."

"Go away and see the house!" How could she

see or do anything but sit speechless, gazing at the terrible pictures which, like a kaleidoscope, her heart changed into fresh combinations every moment! But she must not display her distress. She must hide the grief she had no right to feel.

"While you take your tea, I have a message to leave with Mrs. Leavett," she said, and escaped to her own room, where she wrote a hasty letter full of the anxiety that was rending her soul, begging for further news, and announcing the arrival of Mr. Gribble. No matter if it were seen or not, she must send him a word of sympathy, whatever the risk. This she addressed to Leigh, under cover to the Editor of the *Electric Despatch*, and gave it to Mrs. Leavett to post —telling her at the same time the sad news which Gribble had brought.

Then recovering herself with a determined effort of self-control, she went forth calmly with her loyal ally, and inspected the house he thought of buying; entering with seeming interest into the question of alterations and improvements, while a vibration in her heart kept continually beating out the words: "Wounded, suffering, alone—in need of all things!" with maddening iteration. Never, when in after years she sat at dinner with the hospitable little Anglo-Indian, could she look at a certain piece of scroll-like ornamentation over the door, respecting which there was a question of removal, without associating it with a mental vision of a recumbent figure, stretched in a wretched room, and a rough peasant woman administering some unpalatable decoction.

The days that succeeded were slow and painful. Her own pulse grew weak and feverish; her cheek—

never very rosy—assumed a sickly pallor, and Mrs. Leavett grew anxious about her "dear young lady."

"What's the matter with you?" Gribble exclaimed. "You are looking worse and worse. You are just lost for want of a little change. I'll take you away to Folkestone for a few days. I don't want to go far from town. I want to have early news from Griffith. He is more than a week gone. Come, pack up your clothes. We'll start to-morrow, and find a quiet lodging, where we won't be paraded in a visitors' list. You follow us with your boy on Saturday, Mrs. Leavett, for as long as you can stay. We will all be the better for a sniff of the briny."

CHAPTER XIV.

FRESH crisp air, the sweet salt sea-breeze, and out-door life, brought Mildred new strength to bear her anxiety. Could she—she told herself—could she know Leigh to be safe, restored to health, work, ambition, she would set about the effort to renounce him with courage and resolution; but while there was a chance that death might part them for ever, she could think of nothing save the hope of meeting him once more—just once, before bidding each other a final farewell; then she would recommence life seriously, with resignation and patience.

She had had no reply to the letter she sent Leigh, but she hardly hoped for one. There was no resource but to wait, with all expression of that painful waiting suppressed, and do the best she could to be a pleasant

companion to her good friend Gribble, who watched her more keenly and intelligently than she thought.

Mrs. Leavett had paid her visit, and been right royally treated by their hospitable entertainer. Dick, to his infinite delight, was left behind.

Gribble was amused with him. He was a quaint, original little fellow, wonderfully refined and developed by his frequent companionship with Mildred. His decided talent for drawing was another item in his favour; and Gribble was quite interested in the rough sketches he took of trees and houses, ships, and even the rugged boatmen who lounged about the harbour.

A gleam of hope visited Mildred shortly after Gribble had established himself and his party in lodgings a little retired from the best and most prominent situations. A letter from Frank Griffith announced that he had found Leigh very ill indeed, more from fever and loss of blood than from the severity of his wound; that he hoped in a day or two to be able to move him to B——, the nearest town where a good physician could be secured, and then to bring him home by easy stages.

"If care can save him, he shall be saved; and though he can say but little, he seems full of pluck, and determined to live."

"Well, and that's half the battle!" cried Gribble, rubbing his hands. "I trust in God he will pull through."

Day after day rolled on in a monotony which would have been agreeable rather than wearisome had not Mildred's heart been weighted with sleepless dread.

October was wonderfully fine and soft; and one glorious glowing afternoon Mildred had walked into

the old town with Dick, who had discovered one or two old red-brick buildings, dating from the smuggling period of Folkestonian history, which he wished to sketch.

The boy had been unusually successful, and was in consequence unusually talkative, trying to enlist Mildred on his side in the struggle to persuade his mother to let him be an artist.

Deep in conversation, they ascended to the "Lees," that most charming promenade when a fine sunny day is beaming over land and sea. But Mildred's attention, which was now rarely engrossed by anything present, was attracted to the figure of a gentleman—a man with an air of distinction which seemed familiar to her; a few steps nearer, and she saw it was Frank Griffith—Frank Griffith fresh and smiling. He would not smile in that way if Brian Leigh were not alive and better.

"Mrs. Wood! I am delighted to meet you! I have just been to look for Mr. Gribble, and found everyone out."

"And how—how——"

Mildred could not force herself to articulate more.

"How is Leigh?" he returned. "Well, he was much better; but we had rather a rough crossing, and he is considerably done up. I shan't think of moving him for a day or two. We are at Dover, at the 'Lord Warden,' where I found, from the letters waiting me, that Gribble was here; so I came over to beg he would come and see Brian. The poor fellow has a most extraordinary desire to see Mr. Gribble. I'll walk back with you if you will let me."

This *tête-à-tête* walk (Dick wandered away soon)

Frank employed in giving Mildred a sketch of the circumstances under which Leigh received his wound, of his near escape from death, to which Mildred listened with a relieved and thrilling heart.

Gribble had not yet returned when they reached the house; and after a moment or two of silence, Griffith, with some slight hesitation, said:

"I trust, Mrs. Wood, you will not think me intrusive if I confess that between poor Leigh's fever-wanderings, his inquiries, and his conversation, I have gathered a pretty correct knowledge of the deep obligations my wife and myself are under to you for the disinterested courage with which you saved her from a dreadful fate."

"You know, then?" began Mildred, flushing crimson.

"I know a good deal, which I am sure you will believe is safe with me. But I am convinced that had Leigh been himself, he would never have let out so much, though we are such chums. I trust you feel assured of my prudence and secrecy."

"I have every confidence in you, Mr. Griffith. But I would rather not look back; I would rather not think of my misfortunes. I was very pleased to be of use to Mrs. Griffith and to you. You were my first friend, you know," smiling. "Tell me how you think Mr. Leigh really is."

"I think that with great care he will pull through; but he is frightfully weak from loss of blood, and the least effort brings on fever, and throws him back. He has so great a wish to see Mr. Gribble, that I am sure he will not refuse to return with me."

"I am sure he will not," returned Mildred.

As she spoke, Gribble came in.

"Hey! are you back again?" he cried, his honest round face beaming a welcome. "I am right glad to see you. And that poor fellow Leigh? you haven't left him hehind, I'll be bound?"

"No, certainly not," returned Frank Griffith, shaking hands cordially with him. Having repeated the report he had already given Mildred, he went on: "I don't think Brian Leigh has ever had the pleasure of meeting you, but he has an extraordinary anxiety to make your acquaintance, and gave me no peace until I promised to come over and bring you to see him, if you would not mind the trouble."

"Mind! no, by no means! I'll be delighted. I'll go back with you this minute."

"Thanks, many thanks; but I shall not ask you to return to-day. Leigh has been exceedingly feverish all last night and this morning; a visit so late in the day might destroy all chance of a night's rest. If you would be so good as to come over to-morrow, any time before two, it might be better."

"Very well; I'll come without fail. Now you must have a biscuit and a glass of sherry. It's something to see a man who is fresh from the seat of war."

"From the terrible track of war," returned Frank. "I assure you, the little I saw was enough to make one join the Society of Friends;" and for some minutes he continued to describe the miserable condition of the country near the scene of the great struggle. "But it is a gruesome subject," said Frank, rising; "and I must go, if I don't intend to lose my train. Brian will wonder I am not back."

"We mustn't ask you to stay, then. Take another glass of sherry. No! You young fellows are very

abstemious! Tell me, how do you think Mrs.—Mrs. Wood is looking, hey?"

"Well," with a kindly glance, "not so well as she did this time last year."

"How?" cried Gribble, displeased. "Why, she is looking fifty per cent. better than when I first saw her a month ago."

"I certainly feel much better," said Mildred, smiling, "and ever so much happier."

"When I last saw you, you had been refreshed by a summer and autumn at Pennogwen," said Frank, "and you know we Griffiths swear by Pennogwen air."

"Ay! that's your mother's place, ain't it?" said Gribble. "I'd like to see it; and I'd like to pay my respects to Mrs. Griffith herself. She seems to have behaved uncommon kind to this—this ward of mine," hesitating how to denominate Mildred, and then brightening up when he had solved the difficulty. "But I suppose it wouldn't do to let the cat out of the bag just yet. Still, I am not going to keep an extinguisher on my young friend here always. I suppose you know her whole story?"

"I believe I do," returned Frank, smiling, as he looked at Mildred; "and more—the full extent of my obligation to her; but I hope we shall have frequent opportunities of talking this over in the better days that are coming. For the present, I must really run away."

"I'll walk with you to the train," cried Gribble, catching up his hat.

Mildred was infinitely thankful to be alone. A mighty load was lifted from her heart. Leigh was in England, within reach of all that skill and science

could do for him! Though he was evidently very ill, she hoped for his complete restoration. And she herself no longer friendless and nameless—she once more ventured to look forward, as she had not for many a day. Recognition by, and reunion with her brother was not impossible. Her soul was lifted up in gratitude. She should have courage, then, to renounce Leigh, even to resign the inexpressible sweetness of a carefully restricted intercourse under the guise of quiet friendship. For him, his future, his character, it was infinitely better that he should give her up completely; nor could this be so hard to a man full of resource—on the threshold of a successful career, with all the distractions of society at his command—as to herself, to whom he was so much—*how* much her heart alone could measure.

The return of Gribble, decidedly warm and still a little breathless, interrupted these thoughts.

"Phew!" he exclaimed, wiping his brow. "How fast those young long-legged fellows walk! Griffith was in capital time for the train, after all. I think he and his wife will be nice friends for you, my dear. But I'm afraid that poor chap Leigh is in a bad way. You see, though they got the bullet out, he lay so long unattended to, and lost so much blood; and then he was in want of all necessaries, in a wretched hole, and altogether he is very ill indeed. If the repeated fits of fever can't be stopped, I am afraid there is little chance for him. I didn't mean to frighten you, my dear. Why, you look like a ghost! fit to drop! Ah! the dreadful life you have led has taken the heart out of you. You can't stand much. I'll let you know what *I* think of him to-morrow. We'll hope

the best. Where's that boy? he ought to be in by this time."

The next morning was a trial to Mildred's patience and fortitude. She was thankful for the occupation of packing Dick up and starting him off home—as Mrs. Leavett declared he must not idle any more; a long letter to her good friend, conveying Mr. Gribble's opinion of the boy's abilities as an artist, and describing the appearance of Frank Griffith, with many details which she knew would interest her correspondent, filled up the time till Gribble's return, which was not till late.

The dusk of an autumnal evening was falling fast, and the room where Mildred sat was illuminated only by the firelight as she awaited with growing impatience and anxiety the coming of her brother-in-law; but she carefully refrained from calling for lights.

"Are you sitting in the dark?" asked Gribble, as he came in.

"Yes; I have been resting and thinking. And how did you find Mr. Leigh?"

"Bad enough! bad enough! Weak as a child!" He paused. "But he's a fine fellow! I never knew a finer—and I hope in God he will pull through! Griffith says he is a good deal better to-day; so he *must* have been bad yesterday."

"Do you think he will recover?" asked Mildred in a tone that struck her own ear—so sharp was the pain it expressed.

"How can I tell, my dear! His best chance lies in his intense mental vitality. A man like him oughtn't to die! I have had a long confidential talk with him—maybe too long. All I am at liberty to tell you

about it is, that you have as true and faithful a friend in him as ever woman had."

"I am sure of that," said Mildred softly.

"Ay, you may!"

There was a pause, during which Gribble sat looking at the glowing coals.

"Griffith thinks," he resumed, "that Mr. Leigh would be better here in a quiet lodging than in that rambling noisy hotel. Leigh wants to come, himself. I have been looking round before I came in, and I have taken rooms for him just at the corner there in Palmerston Road: there's a nice large dining-room and bedroom on the ground-floor, and a south aspect. Griffith says if he has a good night and it's fine to-morrow, he'll try and move him. Another reason for coming here is that I see Griffith is anxious to get away back to his wife; it's not pleasant for her to be all alone in a remote part of Ireland, so I have offered to look after Leigh; and another chum of his, a newspaper chap, is coming down next month, so I shall get everything ready for to-morrow afternoon."

Then she might see him soon!—see him, and satisfy herself of his condition; hear his voice, and read all his eyes would tell her. Mr. Gribble said he was her faithful friend! Perhaps absence and suffering had taught him that friendship was all that must exist between them! How much had he confided to Mr. Gribble?

A rush of such thoughts as these made her tremble in every nerve, and with difficulty command her voice to ask:

"And do you think he will be able to bear removal?"

"I think he has set his heart upon it so earnestly, that it will do him less harm than to stay where he is; and I think he is anxious too that Griffith should return to his home and his work. He is quite willing that we should take care of him."

"We!" Then it was to be permitted her, to see and talk with him!

She gradually recovered her self-possession, and was more than usually sympathetic and communicative with her kind unselfish host, who had rarely been so happy, so busy, so important, as during the next twenty-four hours.

The following morning Gribble was up at cock-crow, bustling to and fro, buying all imaginable dainties; hiring easy invalid chairs of the most complicated construction; inspecting the lamps, the beds, the kitchen, in the quarters he had secured—and nearly driving the landlady frantic.

Mildred, finding it impossible to sit still, took refuge in a long ramble on the beach, taking a book as an excuse to sit among the rocks, and resolutely keeping away from home till she thought the transit from Dover must be accomplished.

When at last she reached their apartments, Gribble was still absent, and she had to wait with what fortitude she could till the sound of his latch-key in the lock made her heart bound.

"Oh, you have come in at last, my dear!" he cried, throwing his soft wideawake hat on the table. "Well, I am just done, I can tell you; but that's no great matter. We have managed capitally. Leigh is safe in his new quarters, and has borne the journey wonderfully, though he very nearly fainted when we

got him into the house. He'll do, my dear—I am quite sure he will; but he'll need a deal of care. However, we won't spare that. Just ring the bell, and ask if we can have dinner a little earlier; I'm ready to eat my boots. Griffith said he'd come in and have a talk when Leigh had been settled for the night. He has a capital servant, a German, who is equal to any nurse."

In a day or two the improvement in their patient was more decided; there was less fever, and a little more inclination to take food.

Frank Griffith began to talk of returning home.

"Do you know, Mrs. Wood," he said one evening, as he was playing a game of cribbage with Gribble, and Mildred sat at work near the lamp, "Leigh has been asking to see you so persistently, that I can't put off asking you any longer. Would you mind coming in with Mr. Gribble to-morrow, and having a talk with him? It would cheer him up."

"I will go with pleasure," said Mildred steadily. "He has done me so much service, I should be glad to do anything for him."

"Yes," remarked Gribble; "I think he is strong enough to bear it now."

He spoke as if the matter had been discussed before.

"Come in about half-past two—that's his best time," said Frank. "If he goes on as he is doing, I hope we'll have him out driving in a few days."

This short conversation gave Mildred a sleepless night.

They were to meet once more! How should she find him? Now would come the greatest trial of all —the real, deliberate, final parting.

"I look, too, as if I had been wounded and dragged back from the jaws of death!" she thought, as she gazed at her own image in the glass, while making a simple though careful toilet, before accompanying Gribble to pay her feverishly anticipated visit.

Her pale cheeks, the dark shade under her large wistful eyes, the diminished roundness of her delicate cheek, showed that she had suffered and done battle; but her self-control had grown with exercise, and neither of her companions guessed at the intense emotion that quivered and throbbed under her exterior silence and stillness.

"Here is a new visitor for you," said Gribble, ushering Mildred into the presence she had longed for.

Opposite the door, and sheltered from the light, Leigh was stretched on a large old-fashioned sofa, wrapped in a dark dressing-gown of Indian stuff, a fur rug thrown over his feet. He was deadly pale and hollow-eyed, and the hand that lay across his chest seemed quite bloodless. His hair looked darker, his eyes larger,—and as they met Mildred's they shone with vivid joy, as if a lamp had been suddenly lit up behind them.

There is probably nothing which appeals so irresistibly to a woman as the helplessness and suffering of the man she loves, who, under normal conditions, would be her stay and shield—on whose strength she could lean, and whose guidance she could follow. His weakness evokes her loving respect; his needs are sacred rightful demands upon inexhaustible stores of tenderest care; and the sense of being for a while

guardian, protector—all to him, that he was to her, swells her soul with pride and courage.

Mildred drew near gently, trying to steady her trembling limbs. Leigh did not speak; he only held out a feeble hand, which she took and softly pressed, compelling herself to say, in a low steady voice, "You are better?"

"I am," he returned, his eyes dwelling on her. He sighed; then, with a brief sweet smile, added, "I am going to live—and hope."

"Yes, you must," replied Mildred, answering his smile.

"Frank," said Leigh, "a chair here for Mrs. Wood!"

Then, when she was seated, he asked with a smile:

"Are you still to be Mrs. Wood?"

"Ah! that's what I cannot make up my mind about," struck in Gribble. "She doesn't like going back to 'Welby,' naturally; but I think she must—I greatly object to an alias."

"We need not decide at once," she remarked.

"I have to thank you for the flowers you sent me," said Leigh, and then kept silent for some time, while Frank and Gribble talked cheerfully of plans and projects, and the former's departure for Ireland.

Little more was said by Leigh or Mildred; and soon Frank, in his character of *garde-malade*, declared the visitors must depart, as the patient looked exhausted.

"You will come again to-morrow?" implored Leigh.

"I will," replied Mildred, leaving her hand in his for an instant.

For several days after this, she paid him a short visit each afternoon, always with Gribble or Frank, or both; and the patient improved marvellously — was able to sit up for longer and longer intervals, to take a drive, to be so far restored that Frank left him under Gribble's care, with the certainty that he was on the high-road to complete recovery.

They were all sorry to part with the bright, kindly-natured companion whose natural gaiety had been so great a help, but no one wished to exact further sacrifice than he had already made; and so, with many a warmly-expressed wish that they might meet again, they bid him very heartily farewell.

"I suppose this will be one of your last visits to Leigh in his character of an invalid," said Gribble to Mildred at luncheon, the day after Frank had left them. "I hope soon he will be able to come in to us."

"I hope so," she returned; then, after a minute's thought, she added: "I think, dear Mr. Gribble, I should like to return to Mrs. Leavett. I have had a delightful visit with you, and I shall soon see you in town, when I hope to have a little plan for my future to submit to you."

"Whatever you want my opinion about shall have my best attention, you may be sure," said Gribble gravely. "I've some ideas of my own, however, touching the future. As to your going back to Mrs. Leavett for the present, why, yes—I think it would be as well." Something in his tone brought a rush of crimson to Mildred's cheek, observing which Gribble added significantly: "I think you are a good woman, my dear, and doing the right thing."

Then Mildred felt he knew everything; that her

sacrifice was recognised and demanded; that she had bound herself to a line of conduct from which she must not depart.

"I will meet you in Leigh's rooms, if you call there between three and four; and—you'll mention your going away as lightly as possible, but mention it," continued Gribble.

"Certainly I shall," said Mildred, feeling her heart grow cold.

The shadows of an early November evening were falling fast when Mildred greeted Leigh that afternoon.

He was now able to walk across the room to meet her.

"At last!" he exclaimed, clasping her hand in both his own; "at last I have you to myself! That best of men Gribble was here a few minutes ago, and said he would call for you later. Come, sit beside me, Mildred, and let me tell you all that has been burning in my heart through these delicious, tantalizing visits, when I could only look at you and hear your voice."

Then he poured out the story of his thought for her and of her, during his brief campaign, and the maddening dread of dying before he knew if she had gained the protection of Gribble and her brother, every word showing such tender, self-forgetful love, that the big tears welled up, hung on her lashes, and dropped unheeded as she listened.

"When your letter, telling of your meeting with Gribble, reached me," continued Leigh, "I felt I might die. Then I was very wild and wandering, and told nearly everything in my ravings. Thank God no one

was near but so safe and honourable a fellow as Frank! I felt almost like death when I reached Dover, and could not rest till I had seen Gribble, and told him my dearest wish was to call you my wife, should Welby's death set you free; and I implored him to give me a solemn promise never to forsake you. He is evidently of your opinion that we must meet but rarely, if ever. But, Mildred, you will not forbid me your presence altogether? I cannot give you up!"

"No; we must let ourselves drift with the current of circumstances, and plan and promise nothing," said Mildred, her lips quivering.

"What is in your mind?" asked Leigh, looking at her keenly. "My darling, your hands are like ice!"

"There is nothing in my mind—nothing! I shall be guided by my dear good friend, and so must you, and God will send us happier days. See what unexpected help I have found in Mr. Gribble; no danger will touch me now; and—and I shall see you sometimes with him."

"And will that be a pleasure to you? Do you love me, Mildred? Tell me you do — again and again!"

"I love you," she said softly and gravely, while she let him cover her hands with kisses. "But *you* must love your career—your work—better than you do me, and I shall watch it with pride and pleasure."

Then she told him she was going to Mrs. Leavett sooner than Mr. Gribble intended returning to town; and for an hour of sweetest, subtlest delight they opened their hearts to each other.

When Gribble called, Mildred said good-bye with smiling composure that hid her resolution never again

to indulge in the joy of an uninterrupted meeting, and gradually to withdraw from intercourse which might have anything but a beneficial effect on the man she loved so well.

The day but one after this interview she bid Leigh kindly, gently, good-bye, and returned to her humble home with Mrs. Leavett.

* * * * *

Three months later, in a pleasant room opening on a balcony which overlooked the Solent — the principal apartment of a pretty villa at Ryde—Mildred was sitting reading, beside a bright fire. Outside, a strong sou'-wester was storming against the windows, drenching them with thick small rain, and lashing the sea into foaming breakers, while it howled in the chimneys and moaned at every crevice.

Mildred laid down her book and listened; then rising, went to look out of the window at the fast-darkening twilight. She had not long gazed upon the driving mist and angry sea, when the door was opened by Gribble.

"Ah! I am glad you did not attempt to cross; it is a frightful day!" she exclaimed, turning to meet him.

"No. There was no special necessity to travel; and I have just had my letters—amongst them one from Arthur, enclosing this for you," handing her a note.

Mildred tore it open eagerly, and read it through without speaking; then she looked up with streaming eyes and smiling lips.

"My dear, dear brother!" she sobbed. "He is so overjoyed to find me! He does not say one word of

reproach—and he, as well as you, have a right to be angry with me! His wife sends me a sisterly message. This is more than I had ventured to hope for."

She handed the letter to Mr. Gribble, and hiding her face in her handkerchief, she indulged in the relief of tears.

"Hum, hum! it is just as I told you; the poor fellow is but too glad to find he has a living sister," said Gribble, as he folded up the paper. "But, my dear, that doesn't solve the question of how we are to throw off the mystery and disguise in which you have managed to shroud yourself. You cannot sail under false colours all the days of your life."

"I know that—nor can I live on your bounty, or my brother's, as you both propose. But a plan is slowly evolving itself in my brain. When you come again I shall have thought it out. Give me another week."

"That I will, my dear. You are a reasonable woman, I know; and I am right glad your heart is set at ease about your brother."

After some more talk respecting Arthur and his wife, his prospects, and his past, as the fast friends sat in the firelight, Gribble got up. "I am going to dine with a Calcutta acquaintance of mine, whom I met on the pier yesterday. Perhaps they'll have some evening telegrams at the news-room; and I may see something about the meeting of the Brazilian Copper Mine Company share-holders. Welby, as chairman, was to give a statement of affairs; they say some very ugly facts will crop out in the course of the discussion. I hope, for Lizzie's sake, her father will not come to grief."

"I hope not," said Mildred absently.

"Did you read that paper of Leigh's on 'The Rights of the Minority'? Clever fellow! works too hard. He is not quite himself yet, and there he is, writing like a steam-engine!"

"Does he still look thin and haggard?" asked Mildred anxiously.

"Well, he might be plumper; but he'll pull through all right."

"I shall see you to-morrow, before you start, I suppose?" said Mildred, following him to the door. "Good-bye for the present!"

She returned to the window, and gazed long and dreamily into the wild night, till a servant came to light the gas, and tell her tea was ready.

When Gribble returned to town after Mildred had left him at Folkestone, he was startled to find how ill and feverish she seemed. She had a short, constant cough; and Mrs. Leavett's report of her failing appetite and sleeplessness confirmed the kind little man's fears.

He was anxious, too, that she should be at a greater distance from Leigh, as the temptation to go and see her was, in Gribble's estimation, too great for him to resist.

He therefore insisted on settling Mildred for a couple of months with one of the many struggling combatants in the strife for existence whom he had assisted.

Mrs. Briggs, owner of the villa, was the widow of a military surgeon, and was delighted to receive as a boarder, the *protégée* of so useful a friend as Gribble had been to her.

Here Mildred recovered strength and mental tone.

In the repose of the humble, peaceful household, she strove to look steadily at the future, and form some plan of life which might meet her own needs and Gribble's approbation.

Her gentle, gracious manners and readiness to oblige made her a favourite with her hostess, who desired nothing more than a continuance of her stay.

"Dear! dear! what a rough night?" said Mrs. Briggs. "I am sure I am glad Mr. Gribble didn't cross to-day—he'd have caught his death of cold; for he is not as young as he used to be."

"No; and a man like Mr. Gribble ought to live for ever!" replied Mildred, smiling. "However, he is looking far better than he did three years ago."

"Ah, yes! to be sure, you knew him when he was home before."

"If you please, 'm, the gentleman wants to know if you will see him," said the servant, coming in with a card, which she offered to Mildred.

"Where have you put him, Sarah?" asked Mrs. Briggs.

"He is in the hall, 'm."

"Oh, take him to the drawing-room. Is the gas alight?"

Meantime, with amazement, fear, delight, Mildred saw the name "Brian Leigh" on the card, and flew upstairs to learn the reason of his unexpected appearance.

He was standing in the middle of the room, his eyes fixed on the door with an eager light in them, which certainly did not forbode evil.

"What awful weather for you to be out!" were Mildred's first words.

He caught her hand, and still kept silence for another second; then, in a voice husky with profound feeling, he exclaimed:

"I have strange news—news I would have crossed fire as well as water to bring you! My love, my life, you are free! Welby is dead!"

"Dead!" repeated Mildred, stepping back. "How? It surely cannot be! Tell me——"

"It *is* true!" interrupted Leigh, whose countenance showed how profoundly he was moved; "he died about noon this day. He was to have addressed a meeting of shareholders at twelve. A few moments after that time he rose, shuffled some papers that were in his hand, wavered, and fell heavily to the ground. I was present—I assisted to lift him and carry him out. A doctor was soon found, who declared life extinct; some great mental strain had brought on apoplexy, he said, and probably a weak heart prevented his rallying. The cause will be declared, no doubt, after an examination. The fact remains that he is dead, and you are free. It is supposed that dread of the disclosures about to be made brought on the fatal stroke."

"It is dreadful—terrible!" said Mildred, in a low, awestruck voice, gently putting aside the arm Leigh tried to put round her.

"Why, dearest, you do not grieve for your tyrant?" he exclaimed, struck by her tone.

"Grieve! No, not on my own account. But think what agonies of anticipated shame, what tortures of baffled pride and ambition, he must have suffered! Oh! I never wanted him to be punished! God only knows the limits of his responsibility—how far he

knew himself to blame. Selfishness must have darkened his understanding."

"That may be; but all I know is the blessedness of your freedom," drawing her close to him. "Do you not see above and beyond every other consideration that you may be my wife—next week—to-morrow? that there is no more dreary soul-crushing separation for us, but perpetual companionship, complete union, with which none can interfere? I am giddy with the divine delight of such a prospect!"

Mildred was too faint to speak: she leant against him in a half-unconscious state, from which his long, passionate kisses roused her.

"Ah, Brian!" she whispered, as she withdrew from his embrace, "I am too stunned to dare yet to believe in my own happiness. I shall indeed rejoice with trembling. Do you know that Mr. Gribble is here? He is at the Pier Hotel. Let us send for him. I feel I can be sure of nothing till I see and tell him all."

"Yes, he deserves every mark of gratitude and confidence," began Leigh, when Gribble burst upon them in a state of great excitement, having just heard of Welby's death from a gentleman newly arrived from London.

* * * * *

Is there anything more to tell? Yes—every moment of life is full of growth, and change, and interest; but the by-road we have been following has reached a convenient halting-place, whence the outlines of the promised land beyond may be seen with tolerable distinctness.

The changes which followed Welby's death can be easily pictured.

"Well, my dear," said Gribble to Mildred a few weeks after that event, as he sat in consultation with her and Leigh in Mrs. Leavett's drawing-room while that excellent woman poured out tea, "we need no longer be at our wits' end what to do with you and how we shall call you. Our friend here has relieved us from these difficulties."

"He has indeed," replied Mildred turning to Leigh. "I sometimes think that your marriage will fill poor Mrs. Griffith's cup of wrath to overflowing! What a wretch she will think me!"

"On the contrary. I have seen her this morning, and she has been graciously pleased to give her consent; so great is her sympathy with the extraordinary history of her mysterious secretary's 'Second Life.'"

THE END.

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